Spark Whispers

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Spark Whispers

by Ralloonx

Summary

An early war Jazz and Prowl piece. (Sorry, had it labeled before the war for some reason.)

After the fall of Praxis, Prowl finds himself in Iacon as the war picks up strength, with a new mechling, Bluestreak, and a job he never expected.

Not related to In the End Light blooms!

Also, apologies.. no beta reader.

<< >> Is for comms chatter.

Chapter 1: Pain and confusion

Prowl woke to pain and not a little confusion. The errors littering his hud were insistent, flashing things, and he stared uncomprehending at them for a time. A minor shift in frame brought immediate regret. The pain became intense. And someone was crying?

He onlined his optics to darkness. To dust and grit. To being cramped and pinned down.

The mech knew then that he had been caught in some kind of collapse. What he didn't know was why or how. Memory was decidedly hazy. Never a good sign. Nor did he know who the mech huddled against his hood was. Prowl couldn't feel other mechs fields due to a manufacturing error, so he couldn't tell much. The mech barely illuminated by biolights was a fellow Praxian. General shape of frame was telling, but Prowl couldn't make out colors at all.

The mech was also terrified and clinging to Prowl for comfort as he trembled and sniffled. Not that Prowl had much. This baffled Prowl to no end. This behavior wasn't normal, was it? His distant, and often cold, personality didn't have mechs clinging to him often.

When Prowl moved purposely for the first time since waking, the other mech started and then whimpered. Tugged at him desperately, which only brought Prowl to moan in pain. Which of course scared the other into jerking some.

"Don't be dead." Was whispered to him.

Prowl held himself still to ease the pain. One of his wings was trapped. Likely crushed. But he also looked into the other's blue optics and knew he was a mechling. A young one as well. That explained the behaviors, but not much else about this situation. "Don't be afraid." Prowl whispered, unable to raise his voice any louder.

The mechling sobbed and huddled in close once more. Prowl patted his arm and back as best he could, but his range of motion was limited. He had only one arm he could move as he was laying on his side, the wings behind him trapped. It wasn't a good space to be in.

Not knowing how the mechling found him, as he was in his habitat before this all occurred, and now they were in rubble, Prowl focused inward. The tac net was working over time, trying to process what few

memories he had. Clearly the building had collapsed, but there was no sign as to why. He had a vague recall of the building rocking, he was falling, and that was that. The Praxian enforcer decided he was luckier than he deserved.. not only was he alive, but in a modestly open space.

“Who are you?” Prowl managed, trying to calm the mechling. He was so not good with mechlings.

Blue optics lifted, and while sniffling some, the young mech answered with, “Bluestreak.” There was a pause before he added, “Uturn won’t wake up. I tried and tried.”

Prowl vented slowly, trying to settle himself. “I’m Prowl.” He shifted some code around, something he should really not be doing, and dimmed all the sensory output from his doorwings. The mech would feel practically blind without those panels, but right now he had to focus on other things than pain. “I need your help.” He whispered to Bluestreak. “I have to free myself if I want to check Uturn, but that will tear my door panel off entirely. Do you think you could pinch a line at my back that would stop me from bleeding out?”

Bluestreak’s wings shot right up in distress. “What? No! I couldn’t do that! You need your panels!”

Prowl’s mouth thinned to a line. “Bluestreak, if we don’t leave here we will both starve into shutdown and remain until we are found. If we are found. We must try to save ourselves.”

Bluestreak, young as he was, had other ideas of how everything worked. The mechlings in Praxis were always incredibly sheltered. “No.. we have to wait. Right? Wait to be found. They’ll find us. They have to. I don’t want to starve into stasis lock. That wouldn’t be right! That..”

“Bluestreak.” Prowl gave in his best ‘cut through the shouting tone’. It brought the mechling to jerk to quiet. Scared. “There are no comm signals. We aren’t down deep enough to block signals. Something very bad has occurred as a city as large as Praxis would never be silent.”

Sadly it took Prowl hours to convince Bluestreak. There had been a great deal of crying, of sniffling, and run on sentences. Bluestreak could talk up a storm. The only thing Prowl managed to do was not shout at the mechling. Later on he’d be impressed by his own efforts. It would take mentioning Uturn a few times for anything to change.

Aching, and his patience entirely frazzled, he was laying there in frustration (In pain) when Bluestreak finally gave. "...Okay. I'll try." The dark was starting to get to the mechling. Well, the dark, the lack of being saved. His tanks were also starting to get low since he hadn't been fed for a long time before all this occurred.

Thank Primus. Prowl thought that extremely loudly, but gently gripped Bluestreak's arm. "Turn your head lights on.. no, not now. After I sit up. I know you hate the dark, but you must conserve your energon. Only turn on your lamps to see about the leak."

Bluestreak's lower lip was trembling. Prowl was entirely grateful the mechling hadn't been injured beyond some dents.

The process of sitting up was agonizing even with the sensors dialed down as far as they would go. One panel tore off entirely, while the other was crumpled. There was nothing he could do about either. Knowing he was leaking, feeling it dribble down his back, he turned so that Bluestreak could see. There wasn't much room so he scooted best he could on his hands and knees.

The mechling whimpered, and with assurances from Prowl, managed to pinch off the energon line that was making the mess. He was grateful it was an easy fix. Nearly faint with pain, Prowl none the less shifted back and found a Bluestreak practically in his lap. After a heavy vent, he wrapped his arms around the other, and tried to give comfort.

Strangely enough it worked. Bluestreak settled, and his whimpers died down. The mechling's helm on his hood, Prowl rubbed at Bluestreak's arms and pauldrons in slow, easy motions. Frankly it did a good deal to calm him too.

"Your field is so quiet." Bluestreak murmured after a long time together in the dark. His ventilation had steadied to something more normal.

That took Prowl by surprise, "You can feel my field?" He'd never met anyone who could. Frustrating as it all was, he couldn't feel Bluestreak's.

"Uh-huh." The mechling confirmed, helm nodding some. "It's how I knew you were there."

Well. Huh. Prowl wasn't sure how to feel about that. So he focused on other things. Looking at the glowing mess of his own energon on the

ground, he gave into the processes that were running through his processor. The tactical never truly stilled. It hadn't now, and he was reminded there was sewer access in this area of the basement. In fact he was fairly sure he and Bluestreak were the luckiest mechs alive. This building had been knocked into the building next door, which had supported the first. However, due to issues in construction the floor had pulled apart and dropped down on one side. This spilled them both into a cavity created by wall and floor lengths falling just so. When the collapse that followed came, the nook had saved their lives.

Regardless of all this data spilling into his processor, offering him theories about configurations of fallen building, he didn't dare turn on his remaining panel to find out. It was crumpled and would be incredibly painful. "Bluestreak, we must find a way out of here. There should be an hatch to the levels below. My panels don't work. Can you find it?"

"What about Uturn?"

Prowl had forgotten about him. Damn it. He was so out of sorts. "Show me?"

In spite of being lucky there wasn't much room. Their sitting was all the height they had. In the dark Bluestreak crawled away, feeling as he went. Prowl was close behind. The space narrowed drastically at one point, Prowl leaving paint scrapes on walls. In the space beyond, him grunting with paint and feeling faint, Bluestreak stopped. "Here he is. ..He's cold." Was almost wailed.

Prowl turned on his headlamps to a low setting and knew immediately there was no hope. The frame they had found was dull gray. He turned his lamps off. "I'm sorry, Bluestreak, but Uturn is gone. There is no helping him."

"But.. You have to! I need him!"

Prowl tugged at the mechling and again held him until the crying had passed. Poor Bluestreak must be feeling miserable. He pet the mechling for long, long minutes.

"Bluestreak? Can you find the hatch? I can't do it with damaged door panels."

Bluestreak had never located anything in this manner before, and it took him a long while. Prowl tried hard to be encouraging. He also

felt around with his hands as best he was able.

“Prowl? Is this it?”

Tracking the mechling’s biolights, Prowl crawled over. His damaged wing scrapped against everything and he was glad he hadn’t activated it. Once where Bluestreak was, the mech turned on his lights again to see. “No, Bluestreak, turn yours off. But thank you.”

The lights flicked out, and Prowl assured him, “Save your energon.” Sure enough the hatch was there, but there was also a problem. “Bluestreak, get behind me.” He shifted to press himself against the rubble, letting the mechling scoot past. It was going to be a super tight fit.

“Why?” Asked, and after he started moving.

“Because I have to remove the rubble blocking the hatch.” Prowl gave, digging into his subspace for the acid pellets he kept there. “With something dangerous.” The acid launcher was his favorite weapon. Rare, and often considered useless, the mech had found it anything but.

The pellets were fragile, designed to be, and he fixed one at the area he calculated it would have the most effect. Then using a bit of rubble, he carefully pierced that pellet. The acid quickly sizzled and bubbled it’s way through the debris. Prowl monitored this carefully, lifting the slab over the hatch as soon as it would move. It was heavy, but he could lift and shove it towards the acid area. Out of the way and covering the acid. Everything above remained solid, but Prowl saw dust rain down in spots.

No time to hesitate. The lock still held power, since it wasn’t on the main grid, and it accepted his enforcers code. With a beep it managed to open most of the way before getting stuck.

Prowl slide into that opening, and squirmed himself down before finding the ladder. “Bluestreak, there’s a ladder over here. Hurry, we must get down and out of the way.” The mechling was clearly afraid, but with Prowl guiding peds to the ladder, and helping him down, they were both soon in the filthy wet below.

“This smells bad.” Bluestreak gave, unhappy.

“It does.” Prowl agreed. “No, don’t touch it.” He sought Bluestreak’s hand and was rewarded with a firm grip. “Come. We have to hurry.”

As they were hurrying away, peds splashing in dark liquids made up of old oils and who knew what else, there was a crashing sound as part of where they'd been sitting above disappeared. Bluestreak clung to him during this, and he let the other hold.

Once there was only some dust floating down did Prowl dim his lamps and pull away. "Come." Prowl had maps of the tunnels under most of Praxis. One of the perks of his strange gift. His memory was insanely large, and of extremely good quality. It allowed him to store and access data on levels that most super computers only could handle. He never told anyone that however. It simply scared mechs.

However, the map could do nothing about the fact that every access within a mile of the building he lived in appeared to be blocked. Some of the tunnels had outright collapsed as well. He didn't share any of this with Bluestreak, but he was still growing concerned that this wasn't a localized event. What had happened to Praxis?

One of his questions was answered as explosions began going on somewhere in the distance. Above and far enough that the two couldn't feel them at first. It was telling that Prowl could hear them. They hurried from the explosions even as the passages began trembled slightly.

He knew for certain that the whole city was under attack when some mechs shot at him some time later. Bluestreak perked after a long while, the two of them having been searching a way out for endless hours and passages. "I hear someone."

Prowl quietly shushed him, much to the mechling's confusion. Bluestreak was a sweet mech, kind and without guile. How could he know that strangers could mean death? He shut his mouth quickly as Prowl pulled out a blaster. He'd shut his headlights off hours ago thanks to the tunnels having some power. The mechlng's optics were huge as he stared at the older mech. With Bluestreak huddling behind him, Prowl held his blaster at the ready and moved carefully forward. He'd tried to get Bluestreak to remain behind, but that hadn't happened.

The two mechs approaching were big, and decidedly non Praxian. In fact their plating was crude, looking as though they had illegally upgraded themselves with military armor. The plates didn't match even if they had been painted the same shades.

Nothing was said between them even as the two mechs opened fire on

the Praxians the moment they were glimpsed. Prowl shoved Bluestreak down and returned fire. He was a far better shot and one mech went down near immediately, armor or not. During the remainder of the firefight, Prowl getting in good hits and the other missing, the thuggish mech turned tail and fled. Prowl let him go.

Mostly because he couldn't leave the sobbing Bluestreak. While wary for another attack, he walked backwards until he could crouch down and comfort the mechling. "Shhh.. it's alright, Bluestreak. They are gone now."

"What's happening? Why are they shooting at us?"

Prowl found these completely reasonable questions, but unfortunately he couldn't answer them. "I don't have enough data at this time."

Bluestreak stared at him blanketly, distraught and entirely out of sorts. "What does that mean?"

Prowl hesitated and realized he'd given his blanket answer for when he didn't know something. It normally kept mechs at a distance. "..It means I don't know. I'm sorry, Bluestreak. I don't know what's going on at all, and am scared too."

Bluestreak looked doubtful, even as he wiped off his face. Not that this did any good as his hands were filthy. "You don't look scared."

Prowl vented and took a mesh out of subspace to wipe off the mechling's poor face. "I have more experience at it than you do, that's all. Everyone gets afraid, Bluestreak, but there are times when all you can do is pretend you aren't and try hard to do your best."

Bluestreak had to consider that, and Prowl was grateful this was calming him. "I'll try to remember that."

Prowl nodded, "You are a sweet mechling, Bluestreak. I know this has been very hard, but you've been doing very well. Unfortunately this isn't over and I don't know how much longer until we can be safe. If you stay with me I'll take care of you, I promise."

This seemed to assure Bluestreak and with Prowl helping their gained their peds. "Stay here a moment?" Prowl asked of Bluestreak. "I want to look at the mech." The dead one.

Bluestreak's optics were huge, but Prowl patted his arm and moved away. The dead mech was an industrial frame with some seriously

illegal frame modifications. Prowl had never seen anything to this extent before. Fortunately no one thought to protect his optics, and Prowl was a really good shot. On top of the modifications, the Praxian enforcer found a sigil he'd seen before on the dead mech's now gray hood. Decepticon. It seems the war had come to Praxis.

Nudging the frame into a side passage with his ped, Prowl then returned to Bluestreak. "We have to go past him, but don't look. Please." The mechling really didn't understand, but they made it past the corpse just the same.

Hours later Prowl sat holding a recharging Bluestreak in a tiny nook he'd found during their search for a way out of the filthy labyrinth they'd been trapped in. The enforcer was barely able to remain aware, nodding off himself. He was nearing his limits. Nearing a very bad processor crash. His back was a haze of aches and out right pains, and one of his legs wasn't much better. The steady ventilations of the mechling helped keep Prowl calm and focused. He had to make sure this one got out alive.

Grateful the explosions at had least stopped, Prowl found himself shutting down when there was a soft plish sound. He snapped aware, as that meant movement down here.

Readying his blaster, the enforcer didn't move from his spot in hopes it was nothing dangerous. He didn't want to wake Bluestreak unless that was necessary.

Unfortunately he heard voices, faint for distance and the strange echoing of the tunnels.

"You said you knew the way." A gruff voice complained in a threatening manner.

"Frag off. We're close. I..." The rest was lost in the splashing of peds through the congealed oils they were wading through. Unfortunately that splashing was getting closer. Prowl gripped his blaster firmly, ready.

But then there was music.

"That the frag is that?" The rough voice demanded. The two with him clearly didn't know. "Check it..."

The mech didn't get to finish as that music, soft and sweet, turned into agony. Even at the distance it was, the sound that ripped through the

tunnels was painful. The sound hid the very brief fight that followed.

Bluestreak jolted awake and Prowl had to grip a hand over his mouth to stop him from screaming. He dropped the blaster in order to do so. Prowl clung to the mechling, hoping Bluestreak could feel his field as he desperately begged the mechling to be quiet through it.

Bluestreak was trembling, but he held to Prowl, optics huge. The sound clearly hurt them both, but it didn't last long. Suddenly the tunnels were completely silent.

The two Praxians huddled together, praying they were overlooked. Luckily for them they weren't.

"Yo, mechs." A totally different voice broke the silence. Distressingly near. It was a warm, raspy voice. "I'm an Autobot. Ya wanna get out of this mess?"

Prowl kept Bluestreak silent and didn't reply. Sight unseen didn't an Autobot make.

When the silence stretched there were some quiet splashing sounds. "Yo, don't shoot, 'kay?" Moving slowly, a white and dark gray mech moved into view. He had his hands lifted, and his biolights on so that he could more easily be seen. "I'm Jazz o' Polyhex, mechs." His blue visor brightened to a friendly shade, and his posture was relaxed. There were no weapons in sight, but Prowl knew better. And there on his hood, framed by racing stripes, was the Autobot symbol.

Bluestreak sobbed as he felt Prowl relax, and the blaster was lowered. "A pleasure, Jazz of Polyhex." Prowl managed, his voice soft, and a touch rough for his nearly two days down here. "I am Prowl, and this is Bluestreak. You wouldn't happen to know what's going on, would you?"

Jazz slowly approached and crouched down before the Praxians. "Nothin' good I'm afraid. That ain't somethin' ta talk about here though." He nodded his helm to Bluestreak, suggesting not a good time to talk in front of the mechling. Prowl nodded back. Jazz continued with, "How about we get ya out of this pit?"

Bluestreak made a distressed noise and hugged on Jazz. The mech barely kept his balance, but laughed softly and worked to soothe the mechling. "It's okay, mech. Ol Jazz's gotcha." He hummed to Bluestreak softly while petting him.

Prowl decided then that he could trust this Jazz.

Once Bluestreak had calmed enough, Jazz coaxed him to his peds. “We gotta get outa here, mechs. Lemme get a look at Prowl, ‘kay?”

Prowl had shifted to his knees, but then sat back on his peds, weary and hurting. “I’ve lost a doorpanel. Nothing that will stop me from leaving this place.”

Jazz tsked at him gently, “Ya look like the unmaker himself is at your side, mech. I got a pain patch.. It won’t make ya recharge.”

Prowl considered and nodded. That was acceptable.

Jazz took a medical kit of of subspace the likes of which Prowl had never seen. It was filled with some serious medical care that normally only surgeries in large medical centers carried. He eyed the Polyhexian, but said nothing. Not even as the pain patch was applied carefully to a spot where it would be most effective, and nearly unseen. “Thank you.” He whispered as it flooded his system near immediately. Woah. It didn’t clear his stressed processor, but it did lessen the load as the pain flowed away.

In being this close, Jazz pinged his comm. Prowl frowned, but accepted the ID. He’d almost forgotten comms during the days of silence.

< < It’s bad, mech. I won’t lie, but I ain’t gonna say how bad until we’re out of this mess. Don’t want the mechling freaking when you do. > > Jazz told him plainly.

Prowl managed not to react, but it was a close thing. He had already done the math and knew it was bad. Miles of city dropped over every access hatch they had found meant it was apocalyptic. The explosions must have been the Autobots responding. If a little too late. The truth was worse than even he was calculating. < < Was it the Decepticons? > >

< < Yeah. They’re pullin’ back, but there’re pockets of them that ain’t got word yet. Like ya friends. > > Those mechs that had been searching. Mechs who were now dead.

Prowl vented quietly, “We should go.”

Jazz nodded, and took the lead. Prowl sought and gripped Bluestreak’s hand. “It’ll be alright.” The mechling was told with a confidence Prowl

didn't feel.

It was slow going, as it had always been, due to the injuries on the Praxians. Jazz pulled them into a patch of darkness to avoid another group of Decepticons. There was no combat that time, and the three slipped away into the tunnels once the Cons had passed. Prowl was relieved. Another hour more and they reached a huge pressure hatch. It was quite literally re-enforced enough that it could handle explosives. Made in ancient times when it was a gate of importance. Now it guarded only sewer passages.

"Don't." Prowl murmured as Jazz began plugging into the lock. The Polyhexian gave him a strange look as he added, "I have the access codes."

Jazz looked shocked. Which his door panels destroyed and crumpled, Prowl's enforcers sigils weren't visible. "Ya with the city?"

Prowl nodded, and typed in the code with the hand that wasn't holding to Bluestreak's. "I'm a detective, but I worked the beat a long time."

Jazz laughs, soft and throaty. It was a beautiful laugh, "An enforcer. Figures." Still, he grinned as the door hushed open. "Come on, ma mechs. Let's get outta here. This leads to the surface."

Prowl frowns, "This leads to a maintenance shed well beyond the walls."

Jazz nodded, "Yep. No time ta waste!" He ushered the Praxian's through and made sure the door shut and lock behind them.

It was an agonizing last walk. Mostly because it was going up hill. The maintenance tunnel they walked angled upwards. Prowl was limping badly by the time Bluestreak helped him to the maintenance building at the top. There he was grateful to sit a while as Jazz told them to stay as he made a call.

Prowl sank down to an empty storage crate and looked around. The place didn't have much and it was dirty. Mostly used to access to the tunnels below, there was a call box and some crates scattered about the oil streaked floor. Not that the three there now were helping keep the place clean. All three were utterly filthy.

And there in the lights Prowl looked over Bluestreak, wondering how he got that designation as he didn't seem to have any blue on him at

all. Gray and black with a lot of red, he was physically identical to Prowl, as many Praxians were. Prowl himself was black and white with a single touch of red that was his chevron.

Reaching into his subspace he pulled out the last of the energon he carried. He'd been dolling it out carefully, but now he gave the last quarter cube to the mechling. "Remember, drink slowly."

Bluestreak brightened and took the energon, sipping at it carefully. He also pulled a crate over and sat close to Prowl, wings fanning. Glad that the mechling was calming, Prowl slid an arm around him and was rewarded with Bluestreak leaning in.

As he relaxed Bluestreak began talking. Softly, nervously, and surprisingly endlessly. Things were often halting as he struggled to find the proper words, but that didn't mean he ever stopped. Prowl frowned, having noticed the pattern, and he wondered for the well being of the mechling. Bluestreak had been completely silent during long stretches of the last few days, but the moment there was a lull in the tension he began talking. Prowl didn't have the spark to stop him, so merely listened.

Bluestreak was struggling with describing his mentor when Jazz reappeared. It took the Praxians by surprised and they jumped. Bluestreak squeaked, and Jazz's field was soon around them both comforting.

Prowl's optics went huge. That scared Bluestreak some as he'd never seen emotion from the mech during their time together. "What's wrong?" He gripped to Prowl's arm.

The enforcer shook his helm. "Nothing is wrong. Forgive me, Bluestreak." Schooling his features, Prowl tried to assure the mechling. Bluestreak didn't seem all that convinced.

Jazz distracted Bluestreak with, "There's a shuttle on the way. We just gotta wait now. So rest." However, even as he spoke, he commed Prowl, < < What's wrong? > >

Prowl petted Bluesteak as best he could as he replied to Jazz. < < I.. have never felt a field before. I have a factory defect that prevents me from sensing fields. ..Or so I had until you. > >

Jazz crouched down before the pair and tilted his helm. < < Really? Ya just feel faint to me, but ya certainly there. > >

Prowl nodded, but frowned. < < Trust me. I have never felt a field before. > >

The reaction Prowl then expected didn't happen. Jazz merely smiled at him and said, < < Then I'm honored ta be the first. Tis a pleasure ta meetcha, Prowl of Praxis. > > He touched fields formally in greeting. Totally showing him how to do so.

Prowl frowned at him, kind of at a loss. He'd never seen anyone accept his defects so easily. His life had been a very long struggle of proving himself over and over and over again. < < Thank you. > > While he had never done so before, the mech touched fields in reply. It actually felt nice.

The three waited, Jazz also letting Bluestreak talk. Even encouraging him. The Polyhexian could tell something was wrong, but if it kept the mechling calm for now, he could live with it.

Finally Jazz straightened and rose to his peds. He moved fluidly, as if he hadn't been slogging around tunnels and fighting for days. "Ride's here."

Prowl frowned, hearing the engines only after the three of them had gone outside. Jazz clearly had some very good audials. The shuttle was small, and also dirty. It had seen combat. The thing hadn't even fully set down when the side door slid out of the way. A burly war build motioned for everyone to hurry. "No dawdlin'!"

Jazz grinned, "Polite as ever, Bulwark." But he helped Bluestreak in first, and then Prowl. Seeing the condition of the Praxians, Bulwark gently took Prowl's elbow and almost lifted him inside. The enforcer stumbled just a little, but still thanked the mech. With Jazz leaping gracefully inside, the shuttle took off. Bulwark held onto the Praxians as there was no where to sit. Bluestreak's optics were huge until Jazz grinned at him.

Prowl noticed that neither he, nor Bluestreak, were allowed to look outside.

The flight was rather short, yet seemed to last and last. Prowl struggled to remain upright, but ended up slumping against the supportive Bulwark. For which he was grateful.

When the shuttle finally landed, fully this time, it was to a way station well removed from Praxis. One of the many rest stops that littered Cybertron's roads. From here all that could be seen of Praxis was a

dark haze over the city, and little lighting. Prowl kept Bluestreak distracted until they were among too many mechs and tents to glimpse the remains.

The way station had been turned into the Autobot fall back point. It contained the main medical complex, as well as many other staging needs. There were orderly sections of weapons, ammunition kept well away from everything else, and mechs were everywhere. The thing Prowl noticed most was the near lack of Praxians. Jazz got them to the medical tent, and then seemed to evaporate. Prowl was greeting the medic, Weld, and Jazz was simply gone.

Before they could get any medical care, the Praxians were all but hosed down and their legs and peds scrubbed. It hurt some, but Bluestreak bore it well. There wasn't much to be done for the pair. Prowl's remaining doorpanel was removed for balance, everything was meticulously cleaned, and his back covered in a patch. Only thanks to that pain patch from Jazz did he remain conscious during any of this. Finally he was given a cot in a dim corner of a tent, and he knew no more. Sure he wanted to remain awake, but his frame gave him no other options. Prowl recharged.

Chapter 2: Always on the move

Prowl woke to a bustling camp, and a mechling in his arms. Both were baffling until his processor caught up and reminded him of the last few days. Bluestreak was heavy in recharge, and while busy the camp seemed calm. The sounds said that something was going on, but it wasn't clear. Prowl did notice well that there were no jokes being told. No one was teasing one another as groups long together do. Everything was solemn and quiet. That disturbed him on many levels.

Enough to where Bluestreak responded- stirring in his recharge. Prowl wasn't used to that. He hadn't learned how to control his field because he'd simply never had to. He focused on it and sent assurances, comfort. Not that the enforcer was any good at it really, but Bluestreak calmed down in spite of himself. Relieved, Prowl stroked Bluestreak's helm and waited for him to settle fully.

There he remained until a yellow minicon ducked his helm into the tent. Finding Prowl awake, he beamed and brought over two energon cubes. The minicon said nothing, and seemed a little baffled about something after a moment, but then merely set the cubes down near the cots. Prowl nodded his thanks to the mech, watching him leave. He knew only too well what the baffled look was. Another mech who couldn't find Prowl's field. At least the minicon was polite and made no issue of it.

Prowl sat himself up slowly, not wanting to wake Bluestreak, and managed to leave the cots that had somehow pushed together without waking Prowl. Tucking Bluestreak in, the enforcer took his cube and sat on the other side of Bluestreak to drink it.

The fuel went down smoothly and he was grateful for it. Even if it tasted of medical additives. He wasn't all that surprised.

Sitting there, listening to camp, Prowl steeled himself for something he had to do and knew he wouldn't like. He checked the news feeds. With his doorpanels gone his range was now incredibly limited, but the camp had an uplink he could access. What he found was terrifying. Praxis was gone. The city, the entire city, had been leveled. The Decepticons were taking credit.

Struggling not to wake Bluestreak, Prowl rose to his peds and moved away from the mechling. Across the tent so he couldn't be felt. The first time he'd actually been grateful for that defect.

Visuals of the destroyed city were beyond words. No building was standing, and whole sections were little more than slagged craters. The Autobots had managed to drive off the Decpeticons, and were now attempting rescue efforts. The numbers of rescued mechs were drastically low. Of the entire city, the capitol of a city-state, only forty survivors had been found.

Prowl put a hand over his mouth to keep from screaming and struggled with his emotions. He was close to a crash. So very close. Sinking down to sit on an empty cot, the enforcer shuttered his optics and tried to center himself. The tactical took over for him at that point and dulled everything away. The emotions faded, put off and never truly removed, but the calmness that claimed him in their absence was very necessary. There he sat until his frame relaxed. This took quite a long time.

He was disturbed when another mech came into the tent. This time a medic. Iaconian, and mostly white with red hands, hips, and a chevron on his brow in black. Taller than Prowl, he was plain and boxy. Really standard for his city. Optics swept around the tent, and landed on Prowl. This brought the medic to him, and for the second time that day someone touched his field. It was business, polite, and brief. “Idiots. You’re about to crash, aren’t you?” The idiots was not directed at Prowl. Without permission he cupped Prowl’s face and looked at him closely. The medic’s field felt strange as it sussed out something in Prowl. Well, Ptowl assumed it was strange. His experiences being limited.

“I’m Ratchet of Iacon. I’m going to give you something to help with the crash. This whole situation is terrible I know, but I want you to recharge after.” He didn’t even wait for Prowl to answer about the crash. Ignored Prowl’s weak pushing at him. “If you don’t recharge, you’ll crash for sure. Let’s avoid that.”

Prowl opened his mouth to protest, but Ratchet cut him off. “Don’t argue with me.” His voice was gruff and a little rough. “You look about to collapse. There’s nothing you can do that isn’t already being done by someone else, so let’s take care of you while there’s time.” He took out a medical tote from subspace and searched through it.

Prowl decided not to argue as the medic’s field gently swirled around him. It made him relax and feel drowsy. He wondered if this was what it was like for a normal mech.

Ratchet prepared and injected something into the crook of his elbow.

It pinched some, but didn't hurt. "Let's get you back to berth."

Sliding a careful arm around the Praxian, due to his missing wings, Ratchet helped Prowl back to where Bluestreak was laying. By the time Prowl was stretching out on his side, he was feeling the effects of whatever Ratchet used. In moments he was out for the second time that day.

Ratchet straightened and vented as he looked down on the pair. Both would require repairs, but that could wait. He made a note to himself about looking into Prowl's spark issue. And the cause of his crashes. The medic had seen that behavior before. Someone who had frequent crashes always distanced themselves and struggled to stay calm. He was glad Weld asked him to peek in on the pair. The mechling would be fine with a wash and some dents worked out. Prowl would require far more effort.

Packing up his tote, and tucking it into subspace, Ratchet quietly left so that he could move on to the next group of survivors. They had prepared for hundreds, if not thousands. This camp had eleven. Struggling with his own emotions, Ratchet feigned calm. Wrapped it about himself so he wouldn't scare others. The other twenty nine survivors would be arriving shortly and he'd be required for surgery. Still, he had time to check on some others.

He found Jazz with four Praxians in another tent. All adults. The Polyhexian was seeing to their comfort when the medic made his way inside. "Hey, docbot!" Jazz called warmly. "Could use some pain relief here if ya can manage it."

Ratchet snorted at his fellow Autobot, but his field touched warmly. They had known one another a long time by this point and were good friends. "Maybe a little."

Jazz grinned, "Doc's gonna take good care of ya. He's the best on Cybertron."

As Ratchet checked the four over, all exhausted and traumatized, Jazz commed him, < < How's Prowl and Blue? > >

Ratchet glanced to him, < < I had to drug Prowl. He was on the verge of a crash. And a bad one by the looks of it. We'll have to be careful of him. > >

Jazz didn't question how Ratchet knew. That medic seemed almost mystical in how he could read a frame. < >

< < Not here. Beyond some recharge. > > Ratchet kept his main attention on the Praxians he was patching up. One would need replacement parts, but nothing to be done about that right then. Ratchet gave them some pain relief and got them resting.

Jazz looked at the nearly empty tent and then left it. They'd planned for so many, but they could practically put a mech per tent with how little Praxians were found alive. Why had the Decepticons done this? Praxis had been a neutral city. It hadn't picked sides. Jazz suspected there were multiple reasons. Making an example of it, along with that the city was wealthy. It controlled most of Cybertron's banking, including the colony accounts. It also had some of the best crystal masters. Now there'd be no one to maintain the old machines left over from the time of ancients. What a horror Megatron had brought about. The city was practically a fused crater.

Outside that tent the Autobots grimly went about their work. The camps setup for survivors had quickly turned into mortuary camps instead. They tried to keep the sheer level of death from the survivors, but little could be done. Mass burial was all that the Autobots could manage. There were simply too many dead to handle on a single case by case basis. Ignoring the fact that a whole frame was a rare find. Mostly it was melted and mutilated parts.

Jazz rubbed at his lips but then made himself stop. He was tired and needed to recharge soon. That could be put off a little longer however. Turning back to the tent, he went back inside.

Prowl woke groggy and entirely out of sorts. He felt as though he'd been beaten and dragged behind a convoy for a few blocks. Thankfully his processor had worked off the near crash and he was back to normal. Or as normal as that defect ever allowed him to be.

The enforcer frowned as he listened to the camp. Something was wrong. Again. He pushed himself up to find that Bluestreak wasn't immediately close. Instead the mechling was peeking out the tent entrance. Jazz was also here, curled on another cot and in recharge. Or so he appeared.

Prowl made himself move, pushing a thermal away and carefully rising to his peds. He felt ancient and everything ached. Approaching the mechling, shuffling along, he whispered, "Bluestreak?"

The mechling looked back and brightened for seeing him. “They are taking everything down.” Bluestreak was baffled and intrigued.

Jazz, behind them, said, “Yeah, we gotta skidaddle.” The Polyhexian pushed himself up, and swung off the cot. Without missing a beat he started folding thermals.

Both Praxians looked back, but it was Prowl who asked, “What’s going on?” Bluestreak gripped his hand and he held it in return.

Jazz admitted, “The Cons are bein’ ornery. We gotta evac.”

Prowl’s mouth thinned to a line, “How can we help?”

Jazz smiled, and brought him the thermal that had just been folded. “Ya don’t. Ya an’ Blue here get evaced. Come on.” His field was warm and gentle. For a mech who’d never known the touch of another in that regard, Prowl could only respond in kind. It made Jazz’s smile tug to one side. Didn’t stop him from herding the two out of the tent.

The camp was chaotic. With the thermal held in arm, and his other hand tightly in Bluestreak’s, Prowl followed Jazz through the mess. A seeker screamed over head, far too low for safety, and was shot at for it. Uselessly as all shots missed.

Prowl and Bluestreak were loaded onto a transport near the edge of the camp. There were other Praxians there, all huddled together and terrified. Soon Prowl and Bluestreak were among them. “What about you?” He demanded of Jazz.

The Polyhexian lifted a hand even as the transport doors were closing. “Ya’ll see me again. I always turn up.” And then they were moving.

Prowl felt dizzy. He held to Bluestreak, who was crying again, and frankly had no idea what to do. Normally he was the one herding mechs, not being cared for. That everything hurt didn’t help. His back was screaming at him, along with a dozen other, smaller hurts. Finally Prowl began petting Bluestreak. The mechling was the only one he could help right then, so he did.

There were heavy steps on the roof of the vehicle, showing that they were in fact guarded. He could even make out the sounds of weapons fire. It brought the other survivors to cry out in fear, but thankfully soon stopped.

Hours later, when the transport finally pulled into another waystation

the Autobots had taken over. Prowl was a Praxian shaped length of misery. The transport hadn't been made for comfort, leaving his already aching frame feeling crippled.

When the doors opened Prowl found he couldn't stand. Sure he tried, only to crumple right back down. The Autobots were kind however, and too tired for ego, Prowl allowed himself to be carried by a huge mech in red. "I gotcha, mech." Was rumbled at him. Prowl didn't have it in him to answer.

Bluestreak was besides himself, but the red mech made sure the mechling stayed close. "He'll be okay, mech. Promise. Come on, let's get him some help, yeah? Stay close now." The mechling all but clung to the warrior.

Prowl watched faintly bemused as they moved through a camp that was near identical to the one nearer Praxis. It was busier however, and there were more Praxians. Not many sadly. Seems all had been brought here. The Autobots were openly armed and guards were stationed everywhere. The relaxed posture of the first camp was gone entirely.

Brought to a medical tent, yet again, Prowl was sat on a medical berth and put into the care of another medic. He did manage to thank the warrior, who grunted and looked amused. He stayed to distract Bluestreak. Meanwhile Prowl was asked to lay down and was finally given some pain relief. It was enough for him to briefly faint, much to the distress of the medic. Some mildly angry words were given about the lack of care Prowl had received, even as the Praxian was plugged into diagnostic equipment. This medic was Iaconian as well, but not quite as boxy. Had equal measures of red and white too. His helm was squared at the sides, with little ornament. His voice was kind, but he couldn't sense Prowl's field, and the enforcer was already missing that.

There was tsking and grumbling that he really didn't pay attention to. Instead Prowl was listening to the news feeds as his back was worked on. The news wasn't good. There was an ongoing battle near Praxis. For hours. Prowl didn't understand that. What was worth all that? Praxis was gone. The Decepticons seemed determined to make the Autobots pay for something.

The feeds really gave him little beyond the awful images, so he shut down his links. With his doorpanels gone and no physical linkup available, he couldn't hunt the datanet for proper data. It left him frustrated. The medic meanwhile had pulled out the ruined hinges of

his doors, what had been causing all the hurt, and after cleaning that out properly, had been working on the worst of his dents.

Looking over, he found that the big warrior had been replaced by a minicon he'd seen before. Small and yellow with sensor horns. He and Bluestreak were seated near the tent entrance, talking. Or more likely with the minicon simply listening.

"Is he yours?" The medic asked softly.

Prowl looked to him, a little dazed. He had to think about that one, frowning. "No.. or, at least he wasn't a few days ago. When all this started."

The medic looked sad, "Is his mentor dead?"

Prowl nodded, "I saw the frame myself. His designation had been Uturn. It seems we lived in the same building."

The medic glanced over, but then returned to his work. He had gentle hands. "Are you willing to keep looking after him? He'll need someone he feels he trusts."

Prowl considered that too. Normally he'd give that as an enforcer there was no way that he'd be able to take care of a mechling, but that job was gone. Completely and utterly, along with the city itself. He'd been an homicide detective. Had worked so hard to get there in spite of his defects. Now he'd have to start fresh elsewhere. Prowl didn't know if he had the strength. "Long term? I'm not sure. I'm not qualified for mechling care."

The medic chuckled, "Mech, no one is at first. You two will find your footing and your own rhythms. Just give yourself the chance."

Prowl frowned, "For now, but I still am not sure. I have no frame kin, no employment, no where to stay, and my accounts may be gone. What kind of life could I give him?"

The medic smiled softly, sadly, "I'll put you down as temporary guardian. Just so he has someone for now."

Prowl accepted that. "Very well." Considering the devastation, there likely wasn't another Praxian who could take guardianship of Bluestreak. Prowl looked to the mechling and vented.

Once Bluestreak had been tended to, the mechling was looking and

feeling better. At least physically. He was all but clinging to Prowl all the time, fearful of the next stage of this long, strange journey they were on.

The minicon lead them to a motel at the roadside where they were given a room. “It’s only for today. They want you in Iacon as soon as we can, but rest and clean up? I’ll bring some energon in just a bit.” Bumblebee was an earnest and kind mech, so Prowl thanked him for his efforts.

His back was a dull ache, and over all he was feeling much improved after the repairs. Bluestreak was poking about at everything until Prowl called him, “Let’s wash? I’m not sure how much time we have.”

Bluestreak was looking worried as he came over, “What’s happening?”

Prowl rubbed between the mechling’s doorwings. “They want us moved to Iacon, where it’s safer. That’s all.”

“On that bad truck again?” Bluestreak hadn’t liked the transport either.

“I certainly hope not.” Prowl said as he limped into the wash. He gave Bluestreak a thorough washing, which the mechling loved. Hot solvent and some TLC made a big difference. They’d been days since their last wash, and Prowl didn’t think getting hosed down at a medical tent counted. There was no wax, for all Prowl thought that would soothe Bluestreak, so he traded places and cleaned himself. Sure Bluestreak helped some, but the mechling kept rambling and getting distracted. Prowl let him.

Being clean did Prowl some good, and once they were dry, after some energon, they nestled down into a proper berth, and napped. Bluestreak was worn out, and frankly so was Prowl.

It dark by the time Bumblebee came knocking at their door. Their transport was waiting. This time it was a shuttle. Bluestreak was amazed, “Are we going to fly?”

Prowl nodded, “It seems we are.” And indeed they were. Prowl helped Bluestreak buckle in, and made sure he could see out a window. After that Prowl buckled himself in and waited. Never having been outside of Praxis before, he wondered. Who could take in a defective mech?

Once the shuttle was loaded with the paltry number of survivors, it launched and headed to Iacon.

Chapter 3: Iacon

Iacon was an unkind city.

Nearly a month later Prowl was still without his doorpanels, and lacked employment. Only thanks to the Autobots arranging for him to have some support due to the mechling, he and Bluestreak were in a lousy closet of a habitat, sharing a berth, and having almost no room. None of Prowl's accounts could be transferred over. Or perhaps better to say no other city-state wanted to recognize the banking losses of Praxis. It had left Prowl with nothing. He couldn't even transform and drive legally thanks to the missing door panels.

Never once did he regret helping Bluestreak however, as that one was as sweet as sweet could be, but Prowl knew this couldn't last.

Today he was at the Autobot base near the Prime's Spire. There was a recruitment poster of course, and he was frowning at it as the bored looking mech at the entry station checked over his ID. "I'll have to get someone to escort you." That mech was saying.

Prowl nodded, looking to the mech, "Understood." He was here to see the medic Ratchet, so assumed that escort would be involved.

The enforcer waited some minutes before a minicon in orange lead him through the base. The place was packed with mechs if all kinds. Prowl realized that they were seldom Iaconian. Mechs from all over it seemed. A great many of them seemed idle. Wandering for the sake of wandering. That seemed incredible strange to Prowl. He would have expected a military establishment to be run more strictly.

Medical was an organized chaos, furthering some of that strangeness, and the minicon spoke to a nurse who took charge of Prowl and had him wait. Prowl sat on a chair in what amounted to a hallway. There was no waiting room, so this made due. The place was busy with recovering Autobots, as the wounded were always dribbling in from the combats occurring with the Decepticons. The war was on, but it was still early days. The situation not yet as dire as some believed it would become.

Finally Ratchet himself found him there. "Prowl… what the frag happened to your doorwings?" In spite of his surprise he touched fields with Prowl politely.

This baffled Prowl, who rose to his peds before replying. He tried to respond to that field greeting, and wasn't sure how he'd done. The medic had seen him without them at the camps some weeks before. How could Ratchet not know he was missing his panels? "The Iaconian government will not honor my Praxian accounts. I simply can't afford replacements."

Ratchet hesitated, mouth open, then smacked his own brow. "Frag it to the pit. Come on. I'll take care of it." He sounded aggravated. Seems Prowl had done the greeting correctly, or the medic was distracted enough not to bother.

Prowl frowned at him, "But I can't afford replacements. Likely not for years."

Ratchet waved a hand dismissively, "Never mind that. I'll take care of it. Follow me.. I want to get a full scan of you, and do something about the field issue."

Prowl started for that, "What do you mean? I was told nothing could be done about my field."

There was a heavy snort. "I bet you were. But there is, and it's easy. It's not a full fix, mind. I can never make it so you come off as a normal mech, but I can make it so others can feel your field. That issue is uncommon, but I've seen it before. It happens in cold constructed mechs. The sparks are installed improperly. Just need to make a tweak." It was clear that the medic's thoughts were elsewhere as he rambled out that answer.

Ratchet lead him through the masses here in medical to a private room in the back. Prowl wasn't sure what to say, so had in fact said nothing. He'd lived his life believing nothing could be done. Multiple medics had looked him over and said it was impossible. Now he wondered if it was the bias for his being a defective frame. That had been a common theme in his life. The Praxian had multiple issues and so double the discrimination. For not only could no one sense his field, but he also suffered some processor crashes.

The room was snug, the berth taking up most of the space. "Hop up for me? Any chance your medical records survived?" Ratchet motioned to said berth, and began activating the monitors and berth systems.

Prowl paused before climbing up, and offered a data slug he'd taken out of subspace. "I have everything."

Ratchet was startled, but pleased, his field touching in pleasure. “Perfect! Let’s see what the idiots think. Hop up for me.”

Prowl climbed up and stretched out. The boom arm for the scanner lifted and began positioning itself while Ratchet plugged the dataslug into a datapad. He read as the berth scanned Prowl. It took him a while, for there were a great many entries. The berth scanner took a long while as well, so Ratchet didn’t hurry.

“Now that was a load of slag.” Ratchet gave him his slug back once the scanner dinged finished. “I’m sorry they put you through that...” The medic trailed off as he began looking through the read outs. There were some distinctly not normal aspects to Prowl’s physiology. “What is that?” Asked as a spot on Prowl’s processor was pointed out.

Here it came. “My tactical network.” Prowl replied calmly.

Ratchet frowned at him, almost angry. “Did you have this done to yourself?”

Prowl shook his helm. “I was created with these upgrades, but have no idea why. “

“And?” Ratchet prompted when Prowl stopped. His field was firm as he encouraged.

Prowl vented, “That’s it. Truthfully. I awoke being painted my current colors, and then was delivered to an enforcer with the designation Axel. He and his bonded partner took care of me during my first decades. If they knew, they never told me. I was discouraged from finding more.”

“Did you look anyway?” Ratchet asked, datapad in hand.

Prowl nodded, “Indeed, but there was nothing. No factory numbers, no idea where I was created, or why, only that I had to be cold constructed. My processor has been upgraded well beyond the norm, and my memory banks are several times the size of a normal databank.” Being that a databank was a set of rooms with data storage and Prowl was a normal sized mech.

Ratchet was dismayed honestly. Keeping that to himself, the medic motioned to an image of the scan that had just finished. “I’ll have to go over everything closely to find the cause of your crashes, but I can get panels ordered for you. That’ll take a few days, so for now I’ll get your spark issue dealt with. That will require me putting you in stasis.

Is that alright?"

Prowl hesitated. It was difficult to believe that after centuries of being told no, this one medic easily said yes. Ratchet was known for being a maverick, but Prowl didn't know that he was also known for being right when it came to a frame. "I'm not sure." He admitted. "What exactly are you going to be doing?"

Ratchet smirked at him, but while frustrated did in fact understand. His explaining the procedure actually took longer than the fix itself. The medic did in fact know what he was talking about and gave Prowl an in depth detailing of the whole process. What caused the issue in the first place, how to repair it, but that the end result was still never going to be as good as a normal mech.

The medic's openness, willingness to answer questions, knowledge, and honesty convinced Prowl to give it a try.

When he booted not half an hour later he felt no different. "Did you make the change?" Asked as he blinked at the ceiling.

Ratchet snorted. "Of course I did. What? Did you expect to feel every field in a mile radius or something?" Please. Lowering the berth so Prowl could more easily get off, he assured, "The change can't just go away, but you are going to need training. Work with your mechling. He's been getting the lessons and they will be fresh."

Prowl's ego wasn't fond of that concept, but he nodded. This was a whole level of socialization he had almost no experience with. "Thank you, Medic Ratchet. You have no explained the door panels however. I can't pay for them."

Ratchet motioned a hand again. "I said not to worry about it, and I meant that. The prime ordered for all your repairs to be covered. Yours and the other survivors. Sounds like someone's not doing their job in making sure that was understood. I'll contact you in a few days."

Prowl's look was incredulous, but after a moment he managed only with, "I see. Thank you." What did you say to that?

Ratchet nodded, "Spigot here will be taking you back to check out." Outside a mech in grays and green waited, smiling at him.

Prowl tentatively responded when the mech touched fields in greeting. It was surreal. He could feel the touch and the mech it came from!

Again he attempted to respond properly.

Spigot was a nurse, and motioned, “Follow me?” He didn’t say anything as he lead the way out, so Prowl didn’t attempt conversation.

He was soon outside of the Autobot base, hailing a taxi, and considering what he’d learned. What had happened. Prowl looked forward to feeling Bluestreak’s field for the first time, but that joy did nothing to ease their troubles. Bluestreak never complained, and Prowl found he enjoyed being the mechling’s mentor, but Prowl knew he had to find work. They would be homeless soon without that.

A week later Prowl found himself again at the Autobot base. Bluestreak had been teaching field control, ironic as that was, and Prowl had still been unable to find work. It was not for lack of trying. There was always some excuse for as to why he couldn’t be hired. His battered paint, the lack of doorwings, his weak field.. no one wanted to take the risk.

As much as he tried to hide it, Bluestreak could tell something was wrong. He kept asking if there was a way he could help.

That nearly broke Prowl’s spark. A mechling that young should be learning and playing, not working. Sadly that was a common aspect of life on Cybertron these days. The young had no chances unless they were wealthy, so were often put to work as soon as they awakened. Prowl had firmly assured Bluestreak that things would improve and sent the mechling to classes. Never mind it seemed that Bluestreak had a better chance at employment than Prowl.

Checked in yet again at the front gate, Prowl was here to see about the door panels. He didn’t actually expect Ratchet to have miraculously present him with doors to install, but he none the less hoped.

Escorted through the base to medical, Prowl again waited in that hallway. It was a nurse who called for him that time and lead him to a contamination wash. “Ratchet will be installing your door panels, so we need to make sure the area is properly clean.”

Prowl hadn’t quite known what to expect from today’s visit, but installation already? He sure wasn’t going to argue. Not after how well the spark issue had been dealt with, and he was missing his doors badly. With a nod, he allowed the nurse to give him a going over. Extra care was given to the cleaning of his back, as well as the patches there removed and internals also cleaned. Prowl didn’t find it at all

comfortable. The components were still sore even this long after the hinges had been removed.

The nurse dried him off then took him to a surgery room where he was laid out on a berth. To his delight there really were door panels there waiting to be installed.

“How long will this take?” Prowl asked, concerned about the cost, even though he’d been assured it was covered. Frankly he could deal with owing the Autobots so long as he had panels back. Being partially blind for their lack, and not being able to transform, had taken a toll on the Praxian.

“A good three hours.” The nurse said in an apologetic manner. “We’ll need to drop you into stasis as well.”

Prowl vented, but nodded, “You have my permission.”

There was a smile and a nod for that. The nurse was hooking Prowl up to the diagnostic equipment when Ratchet joined them. “You ready?” The head medic asked.

Prowl noded, “I give permission for all that you need do today.” Having been through such things many times before.

Ratchet chuckled, “T appreciate that. But once this is all over, stay for a bit? There’s a mech who wants to speak to you.”

Not giving him time to asked, Ratchet had him lay down in a particular manner, then dropped him into stasis. For Prowl the time passed instantly, even though his tactical kept count.

The waking was slow with Ratchet standing at his side, a hand placed between his doorwings. He could feel the weight, but the panels had not been activated. When he looked over to the medic, Ratchet patted him and took the hand back. “When you feel ready sit up. We’ll need to run some tests to make sure everything was done correctly, and to calibrate them properly.”

Prowl nodded and sat himself up with slow care. It was a relief to feel their weight. Ratchet chuckled at him.

The next hour was spent getting everything dealing with doorwings just so. Unlike other city-states Praxian doorwings were tied into the sensory net, and had a greater range of motion. Ratchet took care in everything from balance to settings.

The hour after that was spent repainting Prowl. That had also been a surprise, but the enforcer was told that no mech was coming out of Ratchet's medical bay with mismatching paints, and that was that.

Prowl felt a new mech. He couldn't afford to repair his paint after the attack, any more than he could have replaced his panels, so it was little surprise he hadn't been hired anywhere. Now perhaps he had a chance.

"Thank you.. but how is this being paid for?" He finally asked of Ratchet.

The medic waved him off as he had done before. "I took care of it. Now, there's a mech who wants to speak to you. He's in my office. Go."

Prowl opened his mouth, then made himself close it. Wings lifted almost aggressively, but Ratchet merely canted a look at him, and Prowl decided not to argue. Wings returned to a neutral position as the enforcer walked off.

Thinking that perhaps this was where the catch came in with payments, Prowl found himself with the prime himself, Optimus.

Stopping dead in the doorway, wings shooting up in surprise, Prowl stared.

Having been reading a datapad, Optimus looked up and then stood. "Ah, Prowl. Thank you for joining me." He motioned to a chair, "Would you sit?"

Stunned, Prowl none the less came off as calm as he nodded and moved forward. Fields touched in greeting, and the enforcer was stunned yet again. Optimus' field was unique. Rich and endlessly deep, as well as comforting and kind. "Thank you, sir. What might I do for you?" He sat primly in the offered chair, hands on thighs. It took everything he had not to have his doorwings showing his dismay and surprise. The Prime!

Settling back into Ratchet's chair, the prime held aloft that pad for a moment before laying it back down. "I have been going over your records. You have quite the impressive resume."

Prowl waited for the next part. The 'for a mech with your defects'. And yet that never came.

“I have need of a mech with your skills.” Optimus continued on. “However, the role I need filled is not.. all that impressive of one.” He felt apologetic, and grimaced a little. “I need a mech who is detail oriented, can handle great amounts of data, is devoted, but also has military level training and proficiency in weapons.” He hesitated a moment before adding, “I am in need of a private secretary.”

Prowl stared, one wing twitching in spite of his best efforts. For all it didn’t seem he’d paused at, for Prowl it was an endless milisecond of consideration. “Why would a secretary require military training?” This was the last thing he could have ever expected. The prime himself was offering him a job.. as a private secretary. He wondered if he should feel insulted, or if he should be thrilled. One hardly got offered a job close to the prime easily, or often.

“The war.” Optimus noted sadly, his resonate voice a beautiful thing even in melancholy. “I have never had a secretary, and all because I have never found anyone who met all the requirements. The position will be.. difficult. Not only due to the arranging of schedules, but also due to the needing to handle stubborn mechs who think to control me, and for the constant possibility of attack. I require someone strong willed, well trained, and not tied to the current political gathering in Iacon. Someone who is willing to follow my orders alone. You fit everything.. with frightening perfection.”

Wings flitted briefly as Prowl considered. “And what of my defects?” Might as well get that out of the way. He knew that information was in his files.

Optimus nodded, “Not a concern to me. As long as we know how to limit your crashes, we shall do our best to prevent them.”

“A unique mind set, sir.”

There was a low vent and Optimus nodded again. “Yes, but considering I have found those with glitches, or seeming defects, are nearly always exceptional mechs, and incredibly good at what they do.. you are not the first to be asked to join me. No Cybertronian is perfect, Prowl.”

Thinking on that, the endlessly surprised Prowl asked, “The pay?” Now, he had other questions as well, leading to Prowl and Optimus having quite an in depth conversation about everything expected of him, his pay, that he would be given free accommodations on base, training for Bluestreak, as well as the means to keep the mechling in

schooling.

All in all Prowl found he couldn't say no. He wouldn't be a part of the Autobots, but a member of the Prime's household. Of which he was the first. Unless you counted Ratchet, who had joined the Autobots years ago simply to smooth a few leadership hiccups over. One of the biggest factors was that the prime truly didn't seem troubled by his defects.

There was a firm nod and he said, "I accept."

Optimus brightened for that and felt of relief. He'd been growing worried the more Prowl asked questions. "Thank you. I can have the housing prepared for you by tomorrow. I know you are not currently in a good location, and for that you have my apologies. It had been my intention to support you in a better way, but the chain of leadership here is filled with those who would believe they know best for everything."

Prowl's wings worked, one hitching up higher than the other. "Hence why you wish to have someone who will not bow to such?"

Optimus looked wry and nodded. "Indeed. You are to be my secretary. I wish my orders to be followed, and not someone else's concept of what that means. You have my express permission to deny any and all orders that I do not directly approve. Never take another's word for it."

Prowl nodded as well. "Frankly, that sounds liberating."

Optimus was well pleased, "Then it seems we have an arrangement. Thank you, Prowl. I look forward to working with you."

Rising to their peds, they shook hands and both left the office. Ratchet was looking smug where he leaned against a berth near by. "And?"

Optimus chuckled, "You already know the answer to that, old friend."

Ratchet smiled, "Congratulations, Prowl. I'll be seeing you soon."

The prime excused himself outside of medical and went off with a red mech that Prowl realized looked near identical to Ratchet. Prowl nodded to him, not quite remembering the mech who carried him a time and kept Bluestreak safe, and took himself off to pick up Bluestreak from school.

This new job allowed him the funding to not only keep Bluestreak in school, but also send him to therapy. The mechling so clearly was in need of that. The traumas of Praxis would take years to fade, and a therapist would only smooth that journey.

Driving out was a delight, and he waited patiently in the front foyer of the school with others for the mechlings to finish for the day. Some mechs looked at him in surprise at his appearance change, but no one said a word to him.

Bluestreak was another matter. “Prowl! Your wings!!” His own were fluttering rapidly in excitement as he bounded over and hugged on the enforcer. “And your paint! You look so much better! I’m really glad you could finally get a repaint.. you were so scruffy for a while..”

He gently cut Bluestreak off with a smile and a quiet, “I found a job. Tomorrow we pack and move to new accommodations.”

The mechling squealed and bounced in Prowl’s arms. “Where? What will you be doing?” He knew how hard Prowl had been trying to find work.

“Come. We shall discuss details in a more private location.” For there were many others around. Prowl stepped back, wings showing he was anything but upset, and lead Bluestreak from the building. The mechling took his hand and gave no protest.

Together they transformed at the roadside and Bluestreak followed. He burbled out words in an unending stream, and Prowl let him. The enforcer had learned that Bluestreak went quiet when he was uncomfortable, or scared. That he rambled on meant he was feeling safe. Prowl hoped that feeling never had to go away.

They drove home to their tiny habitat and there Prowl told Bluestreak about the job. The mechling was shocked. “With the prime? Really?” There was a little pause, Bluestreak’s optics were wide. “Can I meet him?”

Prowl chuckled, “You most certainly will. I can’t say exactly when, but we will be living near him so it stands to reason.”

“EEE!” Clearly Bluestreak was thrilled. “Can we go now?”

“No, tomorrow. “ While that disappointed the mechling, Prowl got him distracted with cleaning up and having fuel. It had been a month and already he couldn’t imagine life without Bluestreak. Which had a

lot more to do with Bluestreak's temperament than Prowl's ability at being a mentor. They spent the night watching vids that Bluesteak enjoyed, and with some games.

The next day their packing was done in minutes since they had so little. Prowl tucked the storage crate into subspace as they left the habitat. Checking out took longer than their packing, but soon they were driving across the city to where the Autobot base lay. It had changed since the beginning of the war to be far more fortified.

Checking in took longer this time since he brought his weapons with him this time. They were moving in after all. Optimus had made sure his arrival was expected, and once everything had been inspected, he and Bluestreak were lead to the prime's spire.

Prowl began noticing odd details of the spire. Empty spots where something had once hung. Mounts in walls that now stood empty. Nothing had been done to pretty the place up, leaving it with a half finished appearance. "What happened here?" He asked of their guide.

The little blue and green mech shrugged, "Optimus did. He stripped the place of anything of worth and used the credits to fund the Autobots."

Bluestreak asked, "Didn't that make anyone mad?"

The minicon laughed, "It sure did! You shoulda seen them mechs ranting about the priceless treasures being sold and destroyed. Optimus was right though. We needed everything he took down. And then some. This spire was the old prime's private playground. What was found here was ugly." He shook his helm, disapproving.

Bluestreak did ask, "What does that mean?"

Prowl kept the minicon from replying with the motion of a hand, "The old prime was a cruel mech, Bluestreak. That's all you need to know."

Bluestreak didn't understand of course, and Prowl hoped he never would. It did keep the mechling from asking again for a time.

The minicon nodded, realizing he'd nearly told a mechling some things he shouldn't. "Optimus went through and turned it all into habs. There'd been a lot of bonded pairs who couldn't live together before that. Optimus is a great prime. We're so lucky to have him."

The habitat that the Praxians were lead to was small, but spacious

compared to where they'd lived since Praxis fell. It had two bearth rooms, a wash, and a living space. Bluestreak was excited, and Prowl found himself pleased. This would do nicely. "Thank you." He gave to the minicon, wings furthering that thanks. Even if the Minicon didn't know that.

The little mech took his leave and Prowl locked the door.

"Prowl?" Bluestreak asked from where he stood near the middle of the room. "What did he mean about playground?"

Prowl's wings sank and he vented. "The old prime used to enjoy hurting mechs, Bluestreak, and he would do that here. I'm not telling you more than that, so please don't ask. Nor ask anyone else. That prime is gone and we are better off for it." The legends of Sentinels depravities were sure to be exaggerated, but all stories have some truth behind them.

Bluesteak looked down, dismayed. "Why would anyone do that?"

Prowl approached him and rubbed at his arms. "I don't know, Bluestreak. To understand would mean I was cruel as well, and I pray I never understand such things. The new prime is nothing like that. You will see." His field shared comfort and he tried to distract the mechling. "Shall we set up your room? Now that I am employed, we can begin to acquire the things you like."

Bluestreak brightened some for that. They spent a small time unpacking and setting up their berths. Sadly since they had so little this took only minutes.

Of course that night Bluestreak started in his own berth, then came crawling in with Prowl. The enforcer decided not to argue and snugged the mechling in with him as he'd been doing for a month now. He was sure Bluestreak would want to be more independent in time.

Chapter 4: The Purge

It had been only a week and Prowl was enjoying himself. Perhaps the power of the position had gone to his helm to a degree, but one could hardly blame him. The power to be a glitch and yet still have the backing of the prime in full – thus there was no fear of being removed if he angered anyone. And Prowl was very, very good at angering mechs. He came off as cold and aggressively fussy when he was focused on a goal. Not having a field others could sense had alienated him all his life, and thus he had seen no reason to pick up many interpersonal skills.

It had taken Prowl a day to put the Prime's schedule and files in order. He had simply jacked in, pulled in millions of years worth of files and sorted it all back out into a proper set of directories. That's when he first noted the corruption. Mislabeled files, others that had been obvious altered at a later date. Those were flagged but nothing done at that time. It was too soon. He had encountered such things before, in the enforcement agencies of Praxis. Had made the mistake of pointing things out to his supervisors. Prowl had taken a long time to achieve promotion, and had learned many painful levels. No, he had to find out more.

The angering of mechs began on day two when the flunkies of the old prime began discovering they had no access to the prime's schedule, nor specific files that Optimus wanted protected. Prowl began using a server under the control of Optimus' security chief, Red Alert. Another glitched mech who had been pulled in from the outside. Even Prowl found him difficult, but the two shared common ground and could work together. Especially since both were determined to protect the new prime. There were many mechs in Prowl's new office screaming at him, but he gave them little thought. This was what the prime wanted. They were told this plainly, along with the fact that his memory was admissible as evidence. The tactical net inside of his processor made the changing of his memories so difficult as to be impossible through any conventional means. Pointing this out made the angry mechs stop in their tracks and start reevaluating the situation. Not that it often stopped the screaming, but it kept things from escalating for the time being.

It was the second week that Prowl stumbled over something he shouldn't have. Or perhaps better to say something others didn't want him to find. In researching another topic for Optimus, as the prime

was finding him useful for things other than scheduling, Prowl found a second set of credit accounts for the prime's household. Optimus had been having issues with credits, trying to purchase important means and materials of the Autobot side of the war. The second set of accounts proved drastically different than the one Optimus was shown. Both files manipulated by the same accounts mech.

Something not known by the general public, and certainly not Prowl at that time, was that the last three primes had in fact been false ones. Chosen for their corruptible personalities, they had quickly fallen prey to the darkness within their sparks. Year by year they had pulled in corrupt mechs like themselves, giving them pointless jobs so that they could be close. Taken care of. Perhaps out of friendship, or bribes. It mattered little. Over time, prime after prime, the house hold of the primes had grown and grown to a bloated, muddled mess. Prowl was finding mechs on the payroll who were centuries dead, others on the same payroll collecting more than one pay stub. The vast majority hadn't even met Optimus by this point.

Disturbed on many levels, Prowl quietly began collecting information on all those on the payroll. Who they were, what they were said to do for the household, and how they had come to be on it. The list grew quite large. He also began discovering properties purchased in the Prime's name, for his household, but were not on any public registry. Said properties were in the hands of mechs on the payroll. Every minute seemed to find a new crime.

It was just enough that he could take it to Optimus, but he decided not to just yet. There were mechs on the account that were heavily protected, leaving him unable to find their designations. Three of them. Prowl was too much the homicide detective to want anyone involved in this to get away. He had to find a way to discover who these mechs were. The hesitation was also due to how new he was at this. Did he bring it all? A life time of punishments for trying to do the right thing had him uncertain.

And that's when Jazz found him for the second time in his life. Thankfully circumstances were far improved. Freshly back from a mission Jazz sauntered in to find Prowl at his desk.

"Mech!" Jazz grinned at Prowl, recognizing him. That grin was lopsided and shared a great deal of character. His visor shifted to a brighter shade of blue. "Ya are looking sleek, ma mech. Much improved." For Prowl had a fresh paint, and new wings. Vastly different from the crippled, exhausted mech Jazz had rescued.

Prowl nodded, wings lifting and working a pleased greeting. Even if he didn't know if Jazz could read the language. The wings shared happiness in seeing Jazz again, but Prowl's demeanor was otherwise calm and cool. "Jazz. It is good to see you again." They touched fields when Jazz was close enough, and Jazz shared delight in that too.

Now, there were three mechs that Optimus had said could have access to him no matter when or who Optimus was with. Jazz was one of those mechs. "I'm afraid Optimus is with General Torque, but you may go in as desired." A doorwing motioned to the inner door to the prime's office. Now the general had been yelling at the prime for some minutes now. Prowl always wondered why a general felt he could yell at a prime, but Optimus let him just the same. Then Optimus did what he felt best regardless of what the mech screaming at him wanted.

Jazz motioned a hand to assure it was okay. "I'll wait." And with that he plunked himself down on the edge of Prowl's desk.

One of Prowl's wings twitched for that. There was a pause as the enforcer looked to the desk, then back to the Polyhexian. "Do not sit on my desk."

Jazz looked relaxed, then sheepish as he lifted his hands in peace. "Okay.. okay.. Prowler." Yet he didn't move. "I won't be long."

The wing twitched again, "My designation is Prowl."

"Yeah, sorry." Jazz gave back, contrite seeming.

Prowl's wings hitched up to a more aggressive stance, but he stopped himself. Two weeks on the job.. did he really want to be angering one of the handful of mechs Optimus had made clear that he trusted above all others? Wings settled to a more neutral position. "May I ask you something.. odd?"

Jazz tilted his helm, "I suppose." Given after a second. "Do warn that ya can sure ask, but I can't promise ta answer."

A unique and honest reply if there ever was one. Prowl nodded, accepting. "Optimus seems a good mech.. but I have been burned many times in the past by bringing trouble to the attention of my superiors. This is the second week in a job I can not in any way afford to lose. If I have found trouble, should I bring it to Optimus?"

That had been such a round about way of asking that Jazz looked the mech over before replying. The wings told of a bad history of just

what Prowl had mentioned. Being burned for finding trouble and reporting it. “Well.. um.. could ya tell me what it is? Sometimes small things are best left under rocks, ya know?”

Prowl glanced to the inner door, and the general was still arguing something. The enforcer nodded firmly and motioned Jazz to come around the desk. He had positioned said desk to where his terminals weren’t visible from either door. “I know you have been away from Iacon since Praxis, but were you aware that the prime has been having credit issues?” Said only because he knew that Jazz was a long time friend of Optimus. From long before Optimus had been made prime.

As Jazz came around the desk, Prowl pulled up the two files. Jazz nodded, “Yeah, he’s been tryin’ ta find the fundin’ ta get those defensive guns on the walls.”

Prowl nodded and motioned to the first file. “This is what Optimus is shown. This, this is the true finances for the prime’s household. He has two hundred and three mechs he is paying for services that elude me, not counting those who are legitimately on the payroll, and the prime’s household owns two percent of all of Iacon. However, this is all hidden.”

Jazz stilled, and his field showed shock. Reaching over Prowl, getting in close, the mech started looking over the files. Checking details and manipulating to see subsections. The work Prowl had done was meticulous.

Prowl frowned heavily and leaned to the side, wings lifting aggressively for the invasion of his personal space.

Jazz didn’t seem to pay him any mind. “How long has this been goin’ on?” Was asked softly.

“The three previous primes.” Prowl gave.

“Scrap, Prowler… this is insane.” Jazz was still looking through things.

“My designation is Prowl.”

“Ya got all this on record, Prowler?” Ignoring him completely. “We got proof all these mechs are on the dole?” Jazz looked at him for that, the two close. The Polyhexian’s field was excited.

“Jazz.. my designation is Prowl.” Was reminded yet again. “I have all

but three mechs. This is why I was asking your opinion. There are three mechs I can not track down without resorting to illegal means, so I have of course not done so. That said, should I take this to the prime?"

Jazz laughed for that question, "Prowler.. ya been here two weeks! Yer amazin'." He straightened, all grins and flickering biolights to demonstrate his pleasure. "Let's go see Optimus! Make sure ya have ya proof." He danced away. Literally danced and headed to that locked office door. Apparently he had the code for the door soon opened and Jazz was inside, "Op! Yo, Torque. Ya mind if I cut in. Op and I need ta dance a song or two."

"What?" Torque exclaimed. "No! I haven't finished with the prime..."

"Yes, I do believe you have." Optimus gave quietly, cutting in.

Torque was thrown by this. He thought he'd cowed the prime and had been enjoying his attempt at dominance. Mouth open, he found his arm caught by Jazz and he was escorted out of the inner office, and to the exit.

"We won't be too long. Ya go wait in the hall." Jazz escorted the mech, who gathered himself to protest, yet couldn't seem to pull away. Somehow the smaller Polyhexian had the big mech under control and in seconds out of the office entirely. The door was locked securely. Torque's protests were shut out with that.

Optimus had come to stand in the inner door, curious what was going on. "Jazz? I appreciate the interruption, but was that necessary?"

Jazz grinned his widest. "Yep. Prowler here found something ya just gotta see. Come on, Prowler. Get yer things."

"My designation is Prowl." was completely ignored yet again as Jazz shooed Optimus back into his office. Prowl vented, wings sagging in frustration. He none the less cleared his desktop, gathered his findings, and went inside that office.

The next couple hours were spent taking Optimus through everything. In spite of his many concerns, Prowl had found Optimus have a completely different reaction from the supervisor mechs in the past. The Prime was horrified, then very angry. No, Prowl wasn't going to be punished for this at all. Instead there were a great many praises. He'd been on the job two weeks and had solved so many issues!

Use of Optimus' own pass codes discovered the designations of those three mechs that had been hidden from Prowl. All were highly placed in the prime's own advisory council.

It had left Optimus stunned. He was up to his chin in corruption, and all of it had been expertly hidden from him. Leaned back in his chair, the convoy frowned at the datapads laid across his desk and frowned. "This must be purged. Yet how do we do this with only a handful of mechs? The moment we move to cut anyone off, it will warn the others and they will disappear."

Prowl gave, practical minded, "We can't. At this stage the war takes priority over mechs who have been living off your credit. Along with that I'm afraid our options are limited in a legal sense. All we can do is change the passwords on the main accounts, then cut off all the secondary accounts we have no legal access to. After that is done we put up all the lands you own without your knowledge for sale."

Optimus hesitated for that, "But would that not leave mechs with no home?"

Prowl's lips thinned and he said, "Not paying the upkeep on these lands alone will purchase everything you require for the Autobots."

Optimus stared at him for that, then nodded, "Do it." It was hard for him to do, that was obvious. The prime was a soft spark.

Prowl nodded too. "We can give a grace period for those living on the lands to purchase them from you. After that we can send in your selection of Autobots to evict them. Auctioning the house and lands, as well as anything they leave behind, to the highest bidder would clear up most of your financial issues."

Optimus considered and agreed with that plan. "Then once the war is over we can track down the mechs involved and see that they are punished." Delayed justice was always an option.

While Prowl new it would never be so easy, he said nothing on that. "There is still an issue. Integer is the mech who is responsible for your accounts. He must be removed and a new mech found. Someone that can be trusted. Otherwise none of this will work."

Jazz, who had been quiet for a long time, noodling around on a datapad, said, "Let Prowler do it."

Both Optimus and Prowl looked at him. "My designation is Prowl."

Was corrected.

Optimus looked to Prowl. “Could you manage expense accounts too, Prowl? I ask so much of you already?”

Prowl shrugged, surprised, but finding no reason to express that. “Easily. Your current work load has me idle a majority of the time.”

Optimus blinked at him. Jazz laughed, “He got bored and found all this..”

Optimus looked between them and slowly nodded, “So be it. Prowl, take over the expense accounts. Make sure only we have access to everything we can legally gain access to, then begin offering to sell the land to those on it. Cease all payments of those I have not expressly authorized. Which are on the payroll I have already approved.”

Prowl nodded firmly, wings lifted, “Of course, sir. Shall I see to it now?”

Optimus was about to reply, when Jazz cut in. “Ya forgettin’ yer council of advisors, Op.”

That stilled the prime , who then vented. “You are correct. They must all be removed.” He sounded so melancholy about it. Had trusted those mechs before this.

Jazz nodded, “Don’t stress it none. It’s normal for a change in council once a new prime takes over. Put in mechs ya trust. Don’t gotta be a lot o’them.” He grinned over his datapad, looking sly. This was sheer delight for the mech. A little chaos was what he thrived on.

Optimus watched him a time, not sharing his thoughts, but he said, “Then you shall be the first, Jazz. Welcome to the prime’s advisory council.”

Jazz sat up straight, his visor going dark. “Not fair, Op!” But that was that, and Jazz sulked a little.

Optimus felt smug of course, “Prowl, if you would, ask Ratchet, Ironhide, Red Alert, and Blaster to join me for a meeting? Then send notice to the four generals on the secret payroll that their services will no longer be required.” This would leave others, but Optimus didn’t want to remove all his combat experienced command mechs.

Prowl's wings lifted, "Now, sir?" Once he'd been given confirmation he left the prime's office. At his desk, he plugged into his terminal using two jacks. Most mechs could handle only one interface into a terminal. Two was kind of slacking for the enforcer. While messages were sent to the mechs Optimus wished to see, and those he didn't want to see anymore, he unlocked the office door so that others could gain entry.

It took him milliseconds to change all passwords and assume control of the two accounts they legally could access. Then he systematically went through and removed all ties to other accounts, as well as the mechs they were paying out. As a side note he sent a detailed message to Red Alert to monitor aspects of this more highly than had been normal. A great many things were moved to the prime's secured servers.

He was in the process of that when Jazz sauntered out of the inner office, "Thanks, Prowler, that was the most fun I've had all month."

"..My designation is Prowl, Jazz."

"Yeah, yeah, see ya later, Prowler." A cheerful tone, and a jaunty wave had the Polyhexian taking his leave.

Prowl vented, wings high.

He was in the process of offering to sell the lands to the mechs who lived on them, when Ironhide arrived. Wings worked greeting for the mech who had helped him after Praxis. Prowl had sent him some good energex, after he'd been employed, in way of thank you. "Ironhide." Was given in greeting. "You may enter at any time."

Ironhide nodded and moved up to the desk to touch fields. Prowl's lack of range made any distance impossible. "Ya got any idea what's going on?"

Prowl's wings flickered, "I am not liberty to say, sorry, sir."

Ironhide snorted, "I ain't no sir to civilians. Ironhide works. Thanks, mech." He didn't linger and went over to knock on the door. Soon he was invited inside.

The others too came, disappearing into the inner office. While that meeting was going on, one of the generals arrived. General Flack was incensed, quite full of himself, and strode into the office as if he owned the place. "I will speak to Optimus!" He thundered.

Prowl's wings remained neutral. He knew that the mechs cur off would soon make appearances. "He is currently in a meeting, and does not wish interruptions."

Flack smacked his hand down on the desk, making the datapds on it bounce and slide. "NOW!"

Prowl calmly stilled the pads so that they didn't leave the desk. "No. Now, either respect the prime's wishes, or I shall remove you from the premises." His voice was quiet, and very, very cold.

Flack reared back for tone and threat. "WHAT?! How dare you! I demand to speak to the prime!"

Prowl simply called for security. Which brought Ironhide striding out of Optimus' office. The red mech actually brightened for seeing the general there. "This the trouble, Prowl?" He actually cracked his knuckles as he advanced. Ironhide had taken over security for Optimus, and was his personal body guard.

Flack's optics widened, but he wasn't so easily swayed, "Optimus! Get out here at once! I must speak with you!"

Prowl closed and locked the door from his desk before Flack was even finished. He could hear Optimus inside, and Ratchet laughing, but ignored that. Was not interested in letting the general get to the prime.. So as Ironhide cheerfully manhandled Flack to the exit, Prowl stood. "Sir, the prime has removed you from his private council. Either you respect this decision, or steps will be taken." His wings were held high as Flack found himself in the hands of other security mechs in the hall. Mechs loyal to Ironhide, and thus the prime.

While Flack shouted and protested the whole way, Prowl found that a quite satisfying end to the day.

With guards outside the prime's office few others came to protest their lost positions of power. Optimus got his guns for the walls, and many other things besides.

Of course the selling of lands did not go smoothly. While a few did purchase the lands, most did not, and evictions were forced. Prowl saw through most of the details, allowing Optimus to focus on Megatron and the war. His days were quite busy.

Unnoticed by the world in general, a meteor shower rained down over Kaon.

Chapter 5: The Cloud

Prowl stood near Optimus in the command hub, one of his wings twitching. There was a low murmur of voices as mechs all around whispered to one another, most doing their jobs. Optimus stood silently, gazing at a monitor, as the generals watched him. There were many frowns and angry looks directed at Prowl for being there at all. This was the war room of Iacon, and no secretary should be allowed space within.

Optimus felt otherwise.

The prime was watching footage of Kaon. Over the last two months something dreadfully wrong had been going on there. The rest of the world hadn't even realized to start.

Kaon was one of the largest industrial cities on Cybertron. To the point that thanks to the lax safety measures of the elite, the entire region was covered in a cloud of pollution so thick the city couldn't be seen from orbit. When that cloud changed, how could anyone outside of the place have noticed?

But now, now, mechs were noticing. A silence fell over the war room.

The cloud had turned dark, like smoke. Thick and rolling. It obscured everything. Then it began to spread. And spread wide. All signals from Kaon had gradually ceased. It wasn't an abrupt stop, but with the Decepticons controlling the area not much came out even before that. Anything that went into that cloud would not return. Neighboring city-states were beginning to worry.

This is why Optimus was now watching footage of a team going out to check an SOS that had come from the badlands to one side of Kaon. The monitor was split between team members, giving the war room footage from each. The footage was thus awkward, jostling, and even nausea inducing.

The cloud boiled off in the distance. Even at range it showed to be constantly moving. Turning over and over on itself as if alive. Inky dark and misty shadow, it obscured all within.

The team was nervous. It showed in their strained banter. Orders for silence were nearly always ignored. The team lead, Springer, didn't bother to chide them twice. He lead a small team of five other mechs

across the rough terrain to where a lone figure knelt on the hard ground. The figure was directly where the SOS had come from.

< < There appears to be a .. seeker from Vos. > > Springer sounded uncertain, yet his view of the mech and the wings made the identification clear.

Optimus' deep voice murmured, "Approach with care, Springer."

< < Yes, sir. > >

The team grew closer step by careful step, peds crunching on the rough ground, spreading out so that the figure was surrounded. One of the team approached more closely than the others. He was a medic in reds, shouldering his blaster so that he could offer care. The seeker was filthy, coated in something dark that gathered in some areas but not others. Even so his white paint, accented in blues and reds, was clear. Fans were running hard on his frame, and his red optics were dim. Only when a shadow passed over him did the seeker lift his dark helm. He didn't appear all that aware.

< < Hey, mech. What's going on? > > The medic asked gently, reaching out to touch the seeker's pauldron. The seeker looked at him in weary resignation.

The medic pulled back suddenly as his red finger tips began to turn black. It was only seconds before a dark subspace began destroying his metal plating. The medic screamed in agony as he stumbled back from the seeker.

Springer shouted as others leapt forward to help. < < NO! Stay back from him! > > The green triple changer drew a blade, the metal singing as it reached the air. Without any warning Springer cut off the medic's damaged arm, and pulled him roughly away.

There was a jump from the mechs in the war room, and horrified gasps. Optimus had his battle mask up, but his optics narrowed.

< < Pull back! > > Springer had the medic against his hood, dragging the pain filled mech with him. Energon was splashing over them both. The other team members wasted no time in gaining some distance.

There on the ground, the seeker lifted his helm further and began to laugh. His voice was harsh, and his laughter mocking. The sound of it all drifted and lingered both in the badlands and the war room.

Again there was silence, this time unsettled. Prowl kept his wings low, wondering what was going on. A mech not far from the prime, in white and green, with as battle mask, said, “It’s nanites. There’s nothing else it could be.” There were fins on the sides of his helm that lit up blue with each word. His designation was Wheeljack, and Prowl wasn’t entirely sure what he did for the Autobots, but he clearly knew something.

Optimus tore his optics from the screens of the team patching the poor medic to give Wheeljack his whole attention. “And what can we do about that?”

The mech vented and rubbed at the back of his neck in an uncomfortable manner. “Not much without getting a sample. Nanites are machines, so if we can get a hold of their programming we can stop them. Otherwise there’s not a lot we can do. You could EMP the seeker, but that’d do him harm too.”

Optimus looked to the medic who had helped Prowl so many times already, Ratchet. The medic shrugged, “We’re shielded against EMP for the most part, so he’d survive….”

Before Ratchet could continue someone gasped and drew attention back to the screen. The team were gathered at their transport, but their attention was entirely fixed on the cloud.

< < I swore I saw something move… > > A blue mech said.

Springer was frowning at the haze off in the distance, optics narrowed as he tried to pick out movement. He found it too. Optics widened as rounded, white forms emerged from the cloud. Seemingly immune to it.

The white forms were mechanical in nature, but not mechs. Each had two huge optics, practically the size of wheels, and gaping maws filled with rows and rows of teeth. Short, stocky limbs and tails. They spilled out of the haze in a growing mass. Like a white wave filled with teeth.

< < Load up! > > Springer shouted, his team leaping into the transport as he started giving orders.

< < What about the seeker?! > >

< < We can’t reach him in time! Can’t touch him anyway.. Move! > > Springer shouted harshly as he leapt on the ship and gripped the

edge as it lifted off. So what if he could fly. He wanted to stay with his team. From his position he watched the seeker look back, then struggle to his peds. There was real fear on his face as he transformed and desperately rocked off further into the wilderness. The seeker's path was awkward and low to the ground.

< < Follow the seeker.. > > Springer gave. Sure he was worried about the white mechanimals, but there was nothing out here to harm. They could be safely left for now. Also, considering the nanites, he wasn't about to let his team get in close.

Back in the war room, Optimus looked down to Wheeljack again, "EMP the seeker. I want him here. We must know what has been going on. That looks to be the Decepticon air commander, Starscream."

Wheeljack nodded and hurried away with a bounce to his step. A red and blue mech followed close after as they left the room.

This brought Optimus back to the others. "If the cloud is made up entirely of nanites we can not use an EMP against it. A nanite cloud of that size is beyond any reason to calculate." For even a light haze of nanites numbers in the trillions. "The focus will be on bringing in Starscream. We must have a sample of the nanites if we have any hope of surviving."

While there were grim nods in reply, one general inquired, "And what of the white mechanimals?"

Optimus sounded quiet and grim, "We fight. No ground tactics however. We dare nor make physical contact with anything that has emerged from the cloud. Mechs with flight forms and high combat output, as well as troop transports fitted with whatever gun we can fix to them. Set up as much of a parameter as you are able. Focus on directions leading to adjacent inhabited areas. Recall anyone you can. The Decepticons are for all intents and purposes gone. We have a new threat." He motioned a hand sharply before adding, "Ask me not for every detail. I want guns taking these things down, no matter what has to be done to protect our troops while they do so. Risk as few lives as possible. My army is not canon fodder and I will remind you generals of that for a second time."

Prowl's wings lifted in surprise at that. He had not expected Optimus to speak so. What had brought Optimus to be so angry with the generals he didn't know, and nor would he be asking. He had little

time to dwell on it. The generals took this poorly for their part. To be spoken to in front of subordinates! That was not at all normal for the Prime.

“Prowl.” Optimus looked down at him. “I want you to coordinate helping Wheeljack and Perceptor. Make sure they have everything they need, including the ships to transport their results.”

Wings lifted high in respect and the Praxian nodded, “Yes, sir.” Prowl ignored the glares he was getting from beyond Optimus’ range of sight.

Optimus dismissed everyone after some final orders about monitoring the situation and plotting the likely courses the mechanimals would be taking. Prowl remained with the prime, not needing to leave to do as was ordered. Jacked into a datapad, he sent queries to the scientists to make sure they went to him directly with material needs.

As Optimus was discussing an issue with a general, Prowl was addressed, “Hey, Prowler.” Jazz seemed to materialize at his side.

Prowl, in spite of the fact his wind sensors should have warned him, found himself jumping. For that alone he gave the Polyhexian a dark look, “My designation is Prowl, Jazz.”

Jazz grinned in his lopsided manner and ignored the reminder. “Been a while since we last spoke. How’s the job been treatin’ ya?” For things had been rough to start. They were still rough, but the Praxian was adapting.

“Well, thank you. I hope your trip went well.” Prowl knew better than to ask what Jazz had been out doing. And when Jazz disappeared for days on end some kind of trip was involved. Such was work as a spy.

Jazz shrugged his wheeled pauldrons and gave, “Eh, not as stimulating as I would have liked.” His field touched with bemusement. Prowl touched back, simply glad to be able to do so.

Optimus turned after that, brightening a little for seeing his friend. “Ah, Jazz. Thank you for joining us. Prowl, if you would excuse me, there are details I must discuss with Jazz.”

Prowl nodded, having no issue with the dismissal. “Of course, sir. I will be in your office.”

Jazz gave him a cheerful wave, field touching in the pleasure of seeing

him, even briefly, and the three parted ways.

Prowl was given no trouble on his way back to the office, and found it empty when he arrived. Which was a rare blessing. At his desk, he ran a virus check, and inspected the jacks for signs of tempering, before accessing the systems of the Autobot base. Knowing that Optimus would need every spare mech, gun, and ship, he began going over rosters. He pulled mechs out of far flung stations around Cybertorn out of their posts, located guns that mechs had forgotten existed, and started the very long supply chain that it would take to get guns on ships with mechs to man them. Ship yards all over Cybertron would soon be making modifications.. as soon as Optimus approved this little plan anyway.

Prowl pulled it all together and sent it to the prime. It was near perfectly timed for that's when Wheeljack contacted him about supplies.

--

A day later Springer was still out following Starscream. Normally he could never have kept up, but Starscream wasn't doing a whole lot of fast flying. Stubborn and desperate, the seeker was doing everything in his power to out pace the cloud. He was doing a pretty good job for all he was staggering as he limped.

< < Still got an optic on him, mech? > >

Springer heard the comm as he hovered at a safe distance from Starscream. < < Sure do. Seekers aren't very good walkers I've found. > >

There was some rough laughter from Wheeljack. < < I bet. We've almost reached you. > >

< < You really going to EMP this poor mech? > > Springer asked.

Wheeljack replied, < < Only thing we can do. We don't know why he's not being consumed by nanites. He's a scientist though, so might have taken steps. All the more reason to get a hold of him. > >

Springer vented, but didn't share that bit over comms, < < So how's

this going to work? > >

Wheeljack assured, < < It'll be easy. I blast him, he falls over. We wait a bit, then I try and touch him. You cut off my arm if things get bad. > >

< < ...Why do you sound excited about this? > >

< < Because this is exciting! > > Wheeljack crowed, < < It's always a good day when you can blow someone up! ..Er, something. > >

Springer rolled his optics, for all he was in alt mode, and watched as a troop transport came into view. Wheeljack was hanging out the side access, thankfully bolted to the ship with safety lines by a grumpy looking soldier. The scientist waited for a good view, then aimed his shoulder mounted missile launcher at the seeker.

It all was fairly anti climatic. The missile hit the ground near the staggering seeker and went off with a dull phoom, as well as a puff of smoke. Starscream dropped to the ground like a puppet who's strings had been cut.

The mechs waited a while, even after landing. When Starscream didn't move, they approached. They found Starscream dirty, but strangely enough not as dark as he had been before.

"His color has changed." Springer noted in surprise.

"That's great! That means the nanites have gone inactive." Field smiling, Wheeljack made his way forward. "Make sure you have that blade ready!" He warned Springer.

The blade proved unnecessary, for which Springer was grateful. Wheeljack turned the seeker over, if carefully, and checked his condition. The seeker was in poor shape, but stable over all. Deep in stasis, Starscream was then wrapped in protective materials so that the nanites could be preserved. While the seeker was sure to be ungrateful for his rescue, the Autobots weren't much caring by that point. The Decepticons had stopped being their main concern.

Chapter 6: Lost in the data

Chapter Summary

> Sorry for the delay. Everything going on has been hell. Jobs have been lost, and now we are getting sick. :(

“Prowler?”

“Prowl?”

“This normal, Blue?”

Bluestreak nodded as he and Jazz hovered over the unresponsive Prowl. The enforcer was plugged into every jack he had on his torso, and was staring emptily into space. Seeing and hearing only what was going on inside his helm. “He says he gets lost in the data sometimes. I’m not really sure what that means though.”

Jazz frowned, rubbing at his chin guard thoughtfully with a fingertip. He wasn’t sure how Prowl handled that much feed, or even if it was real. For anyone else two jacks would have made for processor aches and data overload. Prowl had six jacks in.

Jostling Prowl gently had gotten no response, leaving the Polyhexian perplexed as to how to proceed.

Bluestreak assured, “Give him a moment? I’m sure he’ll return to us soon.” Sure the mechling was worried, but Prowl had always responded to him if give some time.

And sure enough, Prowl did respond. It was slow, but his wings lifted slightly and he asked, “Yes, Bluestreak?”

Jazz was amused that the mech didn’t respond to Prowler. It was a little game between them. Jazz always used Prowler and Prowl was now ignoring him for it. Jazz knew he’d win given time. A lopsided grin began pulling into place.

Bluestreak leaned forward, looking into Prowl’s pale optics, “Jazz needs to speak to you.”

Only slowly did the Praxian begin to take on life. His wings went through a reboot and then lifted. Even as Prowl focused on the mechling, Bluestreak. “My apologies.” Was given softly, with a vent.

“What did you require, Jazz?”

Jazz found it eerie for certain. “Ya okay in there, Prowler?”

“My designation is Prowl, Jazz.” Prowl gave firmly. “And of course I am. I was computing variables.”

Now that had Jazz’s attention. He crouched there, looking up at the black and white Praxian. “What kinda variables?” This was so strange! Knowing that Prowl had a strange processor didn’t quite equate to what could be done with it.

Prowl vented, “Our situation with the nanite cloud. I have been going over the war room simulation.”

Jazz’s visor shifted hues subtly in almost his way of arching an eyebrow. “..Why?” Prowl has a secretary, and he’d once been an enforcer. What did he know of war time strategy?

Bluestreak was baffled by all of this, stood near by, his wings flitting.

Prowl’s soft field felt almost sheepish. He was very aware of his lack of training in that field. The mech’s features didn’t change however. Prowl held himself proudly. “Because their plans are inaccurate. I had an inkling when I heard it laid out, but now I know for certain.”

Jazz tilted his helm slightly. His visor hid his optics so well that when he didn’t wish so it was nearly impossible to tell his moods. Now was such a time. “And?”

Venting, Prowl’s wings drooped some. The mech hesitated again. “I..” He stopped himself until Bluestreak touched fields to tell him it was okay. The mechling was so good at reading mechs. Prowl envied him that. With a nod to the mechling, Prowl continued, “I’ve dented so many panels as of late I’m reluctant. Nor I have done tactics before. I fear they will not accept anything I have to suggest, and it will only make things more difficult for Optimus.” As the prime’s secretary was already in places the generals didn’t feel he should be.

Jazz tilted his helm the other direction. “Yeah, I can see that. Tell me whatcha got?”

Wings flitted as Prowl regarded him a time. However, Jazz had never once mocked him, and had believed him in some important instances. So the Praxian slowly nodded. “The main group believes the nanites are without direction. So far they have seemed so. Gravitating to the

sources of most materials, and following landscape contours. But I have found instances to the contrary." Prowl pulled up information on terminals and showed Jazz multiple images. All in series. "These are the weather patterns for the area, these are time lapsed images of the sector in question, and here are the terrain data. Watch.. the cloud moves against the wind and up hill.. towards these two processing plants."

Jazz grimaced. "Where do they think it's going?" He asked, as both he and Blue leaned over Prowl to watch.

Prowl shifted to another map and pointed out the area. "There is a waystation that direction, and it is closer than the plants. However, the plants are specialized in metal production. There will be far more durable building materials there." The Praxian vented in frustration. "I understand their reasoning, but do believe that the waystation is mere chance."

Bluestreak pointed at the screen. "Look. The cloud is even darker on the side that Prowl says they'll go. That means there's more nanites, right?"

Prowl felt pride, for all the mechling was not truly his. He touched fields in praise.

Jazz too grinned at the mechling. "Good optic, mech." Bluestreak flitted his wings and smiled. Jazz meanwhile rubbed at his chinguard. "Ya got a good point about not dentin' more plating. Lemme see what I can do. Gimme all the data?"

Prowl nodded, and copied everything to a dataslug. In seconds the Polyhexian saboteur had it in hand.

"Ain't makin' no promises, mech." Jazz warned.

Prowl understood and nodded, expression grim.

Jazz did what he could, but when the time came it was for naught. Prowl was not allowed in the meeting discussing the next step of the issue, and his information was never brought up.

Jazz, standing near Optimus, however was there. For the most part he

kept silent, merely watching. This was Prime's meeting, not his.

A plan chosen by the generals, the Autobots went about setting up defenses at the waystation. No one would let Optimus approach the front line due to the situation, so the unhappy Prime sat in Iacon and watched. He still held sway over a great many aspects though, and all the defenses were automatic ones. Or operated by mechs at a safe distance. The prime wouldn't allow his troops lives to be thrown away. Much to the disagreement of the generals. Jazz knew they were already on borrowed time.

The setup went well and then everyone waited. And waited. The expected attack failed to appear. The room's tension grew and it was clear the generals were growing restless.

Optimus, who had been standing eerily still for the longest time, finally stirred. Somehow that simple action drew the whole room's attention to him. "Where is the nanite cloud?" It was not a request.

Mechs ducked their helms in not being able to give them an answer. Especially the generaals. One of them started going through some data. But one young mech, a junior tactician at a station near the back, lifted his hand to draw attention to himself. Optimus nodded for him to speak. "Sir, the nanite cloud has taken a completely different vector. It's heading north to these two processing plants here."

As the images began taking over monitors, Optimus watched, optics narrowed. "And why was this vector not mentioned?"

"Sir, we had no data that suggested..." A general started.

Jazz cut him off. "Yeah, they did."

This brought him the prime's heavy gaze, his field powerful with some anger and concern. Not that Optimus met that anger enter is tone. "What do you mean, Jazz?"

A general edged away from the prime's field, a bit of dismay creeping into his. "Sir, we did everything we could.." He stopped as Optimus held up a hand for him to be silent.

Jazz only looked to Optimus. "I gave all that data ta the young mech back there. Backtrack. They had the data for days, but did nothin'."

Optimus took this in and looked to the generals. His voice was dangerous and quiet, "And why did you ignore this? Those processing

plants are filled with thousands of mechs."

There was an uncomfortable silence before a general managed, "The data came from an unreliable source and seemed entirely unlikely considering what we already knew."

Optimus intoned, "Unreliable." He knew what that meant. The mech the intel came from was too young. Wasn't favored enough. "Flack, Sidefire, Lunarlock, Stampede, and Highdrift, you are excused. Permanently. Your serves are no longer required." Those five being the generals in charge of the war room.

This of course brought a storm of anger and shouting, but Ironhide moved forward to take care of things. The generals were removed against their will. When all was said and done, it left the room stunned and watching the prime for what happened next.

"We must evacuate the mechs." Optimus give, his field filled with urgency.

Backtrack gave, "Sir, already done. Jazz and I arranged for that. We couldn't acquire any of the defenses necessary to stop the cloud, but the area is clear of mechs."

Optimus' pauldrons slumped some in relief. "Thank you. Backtack, you are now in charge of tactical. Have the defenses from the waystation moved over. We must limit the access to materials as much as possible." Optimus knew the processing plants were likely a loss, and that this would hurt Cybertron a great deal. Not for lack of materials, but for those materials falling into the hands of whatever was behind the cloud.

Backtrack was stunned for a second, but then nodded. Feeling entirely self conscious, he started asking his companions for their aid in spreading that word. The mechs in the room were uncomfortable, but immediately focused on that effort.

Optimus meanwhile turned to look down at Jazz. He regarded his friend a time before asking, "where did that data come from?"

Jazz found himself grinning. It was a slow spread that pulled to one side, becoming entirely lopsided. "Prowler."

Optimus leaned back some for that news. "Prowl… and how did Prowl come by that information?"

Jazz shrugged, “He looked through everythin’ Tactical had, along with weather patterns and landscape images, and spit out where they was going. Bossbot, you gotta get him in tactical. He’s wasted as yer secretary.”

Chapter 7: It gets worse

Chapter Summary

> Sorry about the long delay! Covid19 has been creating a good deal of stress right now. For everyone. :(
>
> Wanted to thank everyone who gave a comment. You really made the days better for them! I'll reply when I can.

For all the defenses from the waystop were moved, the foundries were lost and the cloud grew exponentially. Enough to where a local city had to be evacuated just in case. Refugees from all over were flooding into Iacon seeking safety. Optimus found himself fighting a battle on two fronts. The strange invader that was slowly consuming Cybertron, and the very mechs who should have been aiding him – the Senate. They were only interested in their own credits, not the safety of the people. The senators were constantly bombarding Optimus with petty, short sided demands. The young prime was pulled in multiple directions, stretched thin, as he attempted to keep all satisfied. This was truly a hopeless task.

While scientific teams were working tirelessly to find solutions, for now little could be done beyond slowing the advance. Thanks to the loss of the foundries, more and more of the pale mechanimals with many teeth kept appearing. Mechs were dying in great numbers. Mechs then consumed by the cloud to produce more of the mechanimals.

With the old generals all now removed, Prowl did indeed move into the tactical division. While he continued helping Optimus with his schedule, and other such secretary things, someone else took over in the prime's office.

Of course it did not go smoothly. Such things never do. Prowl came in his first morning to a room of mechs staring at him uncomfortably. His wings flicked as he felt grateful he wasn't suddenly in charge. That would have made it all worse. Finding Backtrack, mindful of the stares, Prowl asked simply, "How will I fit best here?"

Backtrack frankly didn't know. How do you fit in a mech who took the barest amount of information and foretold a disaster no one else could see? But Backtrack didn't have the ego of his superiors. He wanted to save Cybertron more than he wanted another promotion. He hadn't

been ready to lead Tactical, and he certainly wasn't ready for more. "I don't know." Was admitted slowly. "How about we go in the back and talk? Neither of us can make plans without information."

Wings flicked, and Prowl nodded. He accompanied Backtrack to the back room that held their datastorage. While apprehensive, Prowl explained his sigma gift to Backtrack, who was surprised by it. That explanation made a lot of things clear on just how Prowl had managed that foretelling of what would occur.

It took them a long time to go over some details, but in the end Backtrack smiled. "I think we need to get you plugged in."

Prowl wondered at the Autobots. How did Optimus manage so many mechs like this? Prowl had spent a life time being put down, and here many had come to easily accept him.

Thus started Prowl's work in the War Room. It would change the face of this strange conflict entirely.

With a great deal more information at his fingertips, the Praxian could begin testing various ideas and weapons that the previous group of generals had ignored. Perhaps had not even known about. The sheer amount of data was more than a normal mech could handle, but Prowl could go through it all and sort out the vast majority of useless information in order to reach those nuggets of data gold.

The most important tidbit had been Starscream. The seeker was thought to be the only survivor of Kaon, and had been taken just outside of the City State before the cloud could capture him. Starscream had been brought back to Iacon with infinite care, and put into the hands of Ratchet, Wheeljack, and Perceptor. They had been working on the nanites found on Starscream's person ever since. The seeker was kept in stasis just in case.

A main issue in it all was the code the nanites used was alien to the scientists. Until Optimus came by to take a look. Ratchet being one of his best friends and all. The young prime was surprised to find he recognized some of the glyphs in that language. It wasn't alien, so much as based off an ancient, ancient form of Cybertronian. Clearly a case of language drift over billions of years.

It took the team weeks to decode that language, then even more time to reprogram the nanites. Then further time to test. There were good results.

Finally Prowl was fed the data and he laid out the course of the cloud. It was indeed now heading towards the evacuated town that was nearest the foundries. The mission that followed was quiet, and without fanfare. Small teams of Autobots ventured forth to shoot missiles filled with altered nanites at the cloud, then to pull away. This was the only contact with the cloud.

The effects were slow. The war room in Iacon was tense and quiet for days. As much as they had been warned of a delay, that didn't change anything. Optimus was there as much as he was able, wishing for any kind of good news.

Then one day it was clear something was changing. The Cloud, at the spots where the Autobots had struck, began to dissipate. Day by day, as it had crept out, the Cloud now began to recede back the way it came. The very ground showed the devastation it had wrought. Even down a good few feet the landscape had been stripped bare. Some couple weeks later, when the foundries were revealed, they too were no more.

The worst part of it all were the survivors. There were absolute hordes of the mechanimals with big teeth, but they weren't the only ones. Mechs were to be found among the hordes of white, rounded forms. Mechs who were hideously mutilated into something else. Larger, stronger, as if something had meshed together the worst nightmares of Cybertonians and given them solid form. They were powerful and completely insane.

The Autobots had been following the retreat of the Cloud, peppering it with new additions of hacked nanites, and fighting the white mechanimals they had started calling Sharkticons. The battles were seemingly never ending, as there seemed limitless Sharkitcons to fight.

Prowl had never fought such a battle, but now he was in the thick of planning it all. Using weapons and means all but forgotten by most, and doing everything in his power to ensure the Autobots came out alive. The losses ate at him, for all few knew that. Few ever saw past his cold, logical demeanor. Safely tucked away in Iacon, some blamed him for losses, as if he treated mechs like only numbers. As he had his whole life, Prowl didn't bother to educate others. He already knew they didn't want to learn the truth.

"Prowler.." Jazz gave quietly one night. "Ya should get some recharge." The Polyhexian had made it something of his duty to keep track of Prowl, and what little recharge Prowl had been getting. Now

he put a hand on Prowl's pauldron, touching fields gently.

This drew Prowl out of his datastreams. The Praxian had been combing them for anything he might have over looked. Considering he'd been doing this days, he was merely desperate. "..Jazz." Prowl murmured as he returned to himself, "My designation is Prowl." It was an automatic response now.

Jazz merely smiled his lopsided smile, and his field felt of pleasure for Prowl joining him in the real world. "Ya gotta unplug, mech. It's been days."

"No. I must.."

"Prowler." Jazz chided, and didn't even get chided in turn for the name. "Ya done all ya can for now. Let the others do their part. When somethin' changes ya'll be the first ta know." For he would be. No doubts there.

Prowl's slumped wings twitched wearily. He was feeling the lack of recharge badly, as it had been some days since he rested. Feeling sluggish, his tactical network churning on really nothing, the mech vented heavily, if slowly. With Jazz encouraging through fields, Prowl began unplugging from the terminal he had been assigned here in the War Room. "Perhaps a few hours." How could he resist Jazz's lovely field pleading with him?

Jazz grinned as he offered a hand to help Prowl to his peds. "Let's get ya to yer berth. The Autobots can handle this for a few hours, promise."

Prowl slumped somewhat, his wings hanging low. There was a little nod, and he stepped away from his terminal after having turned it off. "Very well."

The two were ambling along corridors, heading to the habitats in the Prime's spire when Jazz's field shifted dramatically. Exhausted, Prowl was a little slow to catch up. The Polyhexian shifted into alt mode and peeled off down the hallway without any kind of warning. It left Prowl stunned, but he shifted and followed without even calling out as to why.

Jazz arrived first, throwing himself at a mech Prowl recognized. One of the generals, Torque. Jazz's transformation was artful as he shifted, flipped, and hit the gun wielding ex general with a boot to the face. All in one smooth motion. Torque had been holding another mech

down, about to shoot that one in the helm.

To his horror, Prowl realized it as Bluestreak. The mechling was sobbing, terrified, as he huddled on the ground.

Torque, realizing the situation was suddenly not in his favor, rocked with the blow to his face, but managed to keep his gun. He didn't try to fight. The mech knew Jazz's reputation, and even better knew what the Polyhexian was truly capable of. Torque tried to run.

Landing with graceful ease, Jazz transformed a hand and shot a grapling gun at the other mech. The cable snaked out with a hush of sound, and the head wrapped around Torque's legs. In moments the cable was entirely tangled around the ex general's legs, and Jazz shifted his stance to pull. Torque went down with a crash of plating, and that gun went skittering off, well out of reach.

Prowl meanwhile could see Jazz had everything in hand. He idly wondered how the mech always managed to look gorgeous while doing things, but that stray thought was shoved aside as he raced to his mechling. "Bluestreak!" Prowl exclaimed as he skidded to a stop on his knees and began checking the poor mechling over.

Bluestreak's face was smeared with energon, and he had some dents. Bluestreak had fought as hard as he could, but in being so young there was little chance he had against a combat experienced veteran. Looking up, Bluestreak's field fluxed in recognition and relief. He threw himself into Prowl's arms and sobbed brokenly. Prowl wished he could simply hold the mechling, but instead hauled Bluestreak to his peds. "Come.. We must move." Sure Bluestreak couldn't respond well, but he staggered to his peds, and Prowl rapidly led the mechling away, still holding him close.

They were nearing the exit they needed to take to head deeper into the Autobot base, when four big mechs burst through a door. All heavily armed.

Bluestreak cried out and hid his face against Prowl. For his part, Prowl merely pointed the way they came. "Jazz and Torque are that way. Could one of you escort us to medical? The mechling has been attacked." Sure he didn't feel that calm, but it seemed as though he felt nothing.

One of the security team nodded, and assigned a mech to escort detail. The other three raced off, weapons in hands.

To his dismay Prowl heard weapons fire as the three disappeared from view. Jazz was still fighting Torque. He held Bluestreak closer, prayed Jazz would be alright, and hurried Bluestreak out of any possible danger. The two adults brought Bluestreak to medical, where he was immediately the center of attention. It took a while for Prowl to convince Bluestreak to let the medical staff look him over, and many promises of not going anywhere. Promises that Prowl kept, no matter how tired he was.

Thankfully Bluestreak's injuries were minor. He had some dents worked out, and his face cleaned up. A couple of minor welds. In the aftermath he sat being held by Prowl and sniffling. The older Praxian did his best to comfort in touch and field.

It was during this that he received a comm from Jazz. < < Torque's in custody. We're tryin' ta find out why. > >

< < Isn't that fairly obvious? > > Prowl asked back, sounding surly. If unintentionally. Jazz had saved Bluestreak after all and didn't deserve the ire.

Jazz chuckled, not taking the tone to spark. < < Yeah, but he's gotta say it so he can get the full load of scrap thrown at him. Get some recharge, Prowler. Ya and Blue both need it. > > He actually cut the comm before the protest of Prowl's name could be given.

Prowl vented and rocked Bluestreak. He was exhausted. Bluestreak was exhausted. So he looked to the security mech and asked, "Might you escort us to our habitat? I do believe we both would feel much safer then."

The mech smiled and did so. No weapons out this time thankfully. Bluestreak was rather miserable after everything, but the two Praxians thanked the security mech and locked themselves inside their habitat. Prowl didn't bother with anything else. He took Bluestreak to berth, and there they both recharged.

Many hours later Prowl woke to a comm pinging at his internal hud. Bluestreak's room was still dark, and the mechling was huddled against him. Prowl felt of relief and petted Bluestreak as he accepted the comm. < < Sir? Forgive the wait. > >

Optimus easily assured, < < No need to apologize. I was informed you were recharging finally. Is Bluestreak well? > >

< < Traumatized, but physically fine. He suffered some dents, and had to receive some small welds. It was nearly far worse. If not for Jazz, Bluestreak would be dead now. > > Prowl felt fear for that idea. He'd only been a mentor for a short time, but already he loved the mechling.

Optimus was quiet a second before replying, < < Please take the day off, or longer, to see to Bluestreak's needs. > >

Prowl frowned, wanting to be back in the War room, but he didn't mention that. < < Thank you, sir. How goes the conflict? > > Maybe he could get a little bit of data!

The prime chuckled, knowing the Praxian already. < < Slowly. We are seeing more altered mechs as we push back. Growing more dangerous as we near Kaon. I will need to speak to you on this, but not today, and likely not tomorrow. You need a rest, Prowl. I want your processor fresh when we take this up again. For now, let me deal with Torque. Bluestreak needs you. > > With that he made farewells and cut the link.

Laying on the berth, the mechling close, Prowl frowned at it all. His wings twitched in his frustration.

Chapter 8: A bit of rest

Chapter Notes

> Again, thank you to everyone that made a comment! They have all been so wonderful, and each one made my day. Which lately has meant a LOT! Thank you many times over! <3

The next day was hard for Prowl's patience. Bluestreak, as usual, was a joy to take care of, but Prowl hated being so cut off from the War Room. This whole invasion issue wasn't pausing so that he could be given a few days off.

"Prowl?" Bluestreak asked. The two Praxians were on a couch, Prowl with a datapad in hand, but not really paying it any mind. The mechling had been working on some lessons. Bluestreak absolutely refused to be alone, and Prowl didn't have the spark to make him do so.

"Hmm?" They had been quiet for a long period, so Prowl's thoughts had to stop, shift around, and give him a chance to focus. He shuttered his optics briefly, forced himself to the here and now, and looked at the mechling, "Yes, Bluestreak?" Reaching over, he rubbed at Bluestreak's pauldron.

Quiet a moment, which was telling for the chatterbox mechling, Bluestreak asked "Why did he do that?"

Who? Prowl knew exactly what Bluestreak meant. Torque. Why did Torque hurt him? Prowl shifted to lean against Bluestreak so that their fields could better touch. There he shared comfort, and Bluestreak huddled in close. "He was trying to hurt me." Prowl gave plainly. "He was so angry that I caused his being let go, that he wanted to hurt me in revenge. Yet he knew he didn't have the means to hurt me directly.. but he could hurt you. You being hurt would hurt me, so he did what he did."

Thinking about that a while, Bluestreak said, "That's mean."

Resting his helm against Bluestreak's, Prowl had to agree, "It most certainly is."

"What will happen to him?" Bluestreak wasn't the kind to want revenge, and Prowl felt blessed by that.

“That I don’t know. It’s not my place to handle such things.” Prowl did sound apologetic.

While Bluestreak thought about it a bit more, no more questions were asked of it. Instead he began another long, rambling talk about some of his school work. Prowl patiently listened to it all.

The day after there was a trial. It wasn’t much of a trial thanks to limited time, and a war going on, but Optimus tried. Torque was given a chance to explain himself, to defend what he’d done, but there was little he could do to sway the prime. Not only had there been witnesses, there was security footage of the attack. Of Jazz’s interrupting the execution of Bluestreak.

Prowl did testify, but was grateful Bluestreak wasn’t expected to. No one felt the mechling needed extra trauma on top of everything else he was dealing with. Safely in the hands of Rung, Bluestreak was well away from the trial, and Torque was found guilty. Optimus wasn’t one to kill, but he had no prisons in which to hold the one time general. Leaving the prime to do the next best thing. He banished Torque from Iacon. Stripped the mech of any titles, his ranks, and his wealth, then had him driven out well beyond Iacon’s boarders. Torque’s paint was marred where the Autobot sigil had been removed, and he was never seen again.

It was with heavy sparks that Optimus turned back to the real issue at hand. The invasion.

Deciding that he had to know more, Optimus ordered Starscream brought out of stasis. During the months the seeker had been in their captivity, kept offline, he had been gone over in detail once the nanites had been neutralized. Changes had been found to his system that could not be explained. Repairs had been made.

Optimus, unwilling to breech the seeker’s security and directly access his memories, had Starscream moved to a cell and woken up. There were protests of this from the other mechs, as this was a war and Starscream a confirmed Deception, but Optimus got his way.

So the prime stood outside a cell with his heavily armed guard as Starscream booted.

The seeker returned to himself slowly, wings twitching. But once code had fallen into place properly, Starscream jolted – reacting violently thanks to his last memories. There was no one near him, and his nearly falling off the narrow berth brought him to the present.

Scrambling some, optics wide, he stared at the gathering beyond the bars. The seeker was nothing if not mentally quick on his peds however, “All this for little old me? You shouldn’t have.” He tried to make the fall and recovery look suave, but failed miserably. No one outside the bars was impressed.

“Starscream.” Optimus gave solemnly. “We need to know what occurred in Kaon.”

“We are at war, Prime. Why would I tell you anything about Kaon?” Starscream countered cooly.

Optimus came in close to the bars, ignoring the hiss of warning from Ironhide about the dangers. “Startscream, we are being invaded by an unknown force. Kaon is no more. You are the only Decepticon known to still be living. Please. For the sake of your fellows, for the sake of Cybertron, we must know.” He pleaded.

Starcream was stunned at the news, but not moved, “A likely story. I feel no obligation to tell you anything.”

The Nanite Cloud was being driven back, if slowly. Thanks to the nanites that protected Starscream, Wheeljack and Perceptor had managed to come up with an even better variety that protected the front line warriors. It was much needed.

With the cloud’s removal the fighting became more intense. Wave after wave of Sharkticon was being sent out of the retreating cloud. The Autobots out on the field were reclaiming the factories and towns the cloud had consumed, finding the land stripped of near everything but the dead. Stepping over the horribly twisted remains of other mechs. As if something had begin to change those mechs, only to have them die in the process. The factories and towns were entirely gone. Down to the stone.

Worse was that, among the Sharkticons, were mechs. (The sharkticons not being mechs, but mechanimals.) Hideously warped into huge beasts that attacked mindlessly and violently. They dwarfed everything around them. and were the only living mechs to be found anywhere. The sharkticons ignored them even if the beasts attacked them. There were never many, but all were extremely difficult to bring down. The Autobots began using the mechs against the sharkticons, tricking the beasts into attacking the mechanimals.

Prowl had been coordinating the combat, and had finally been given a station in tactical. Backtrack was technically his superior, but Prowl didn't care he wasn't in charge. In fact not being so made his job easier. He churned data and spit out possibilities, letting Backtrack choose which was best for the situation.

At least until Jazz interrupted.

"Yo, Prowler." Jazz leaned in to look closely into Prowl's empty optics. His visor glinted and dipped to a darker hue briefly. The room around them was staffed by only a couple other mechs due to the very late hour, and the lights were even dimmed. Shaking his helm, Jazz had seen this before. Far too many times since Bluestreak had originally told him what it meant. Prowl was lost in the data again. Likely hadn't fueled either. The mechling was safe, Jazz had made sure of that, and he knew Prowl had made sure too, but now it was time to take care of Prowl.

So he unplugged the Praxian. One jack was plucked free, bringing Prowl to respond. Jazz had gotten the second free by the time there was a protest, "What are you doing?!" Asked in quiet anger.

Jazz simply smiled and removed the third jack. How Prowl managed four he had no idea. "Gettin' you ta stop."

Prowl gripped Jazz's hand before the last jack could be removed. "I am not done." The Praxian said firmly, his wings lifting aggressively. Finally having animation.

"Prowler.. yes ya are." Jazz straightened, looking down at him. "Look around, mech." Motioning a hand, he brought the other's attention to the dim, nearly empty room. "Ya need rest. What are they gonna do if it goes bad and ya collapse?"

Prowl's wings lowered as it sunk in what hour it was. He'd lost track of time. Again. Wings lowered even further as he thought of Bluestream. The guilt crept in.

Jazz took that moment to remove that forth jack.

Wings shot up again and Prowl gave the Polyhexian a dirty look. “Stop that.”

Jazz gave Prowl the sweetest smile. “All done.”

Prowl opened his mouth to give an indignant retort, only to stop himself. His mouth clicked shut and he gave Jazz another dark look. Wings shivered behind him.

Before Prowl could say anything he found a small energon cube in his face. Jazz was looking at him steadily, his field commanding and firm. Quite unlike the normal ease he presents the world. “Fuel. Ya forgot again, ain’t ya.” Not quite a question.

A frown quickly formed up over Prowl’s features. “Jazz...”

“Fuel.” Came firmly.

Wings sagged and Prowl vented. Now removed from the database he was feeling fatigued. Really fatigued. Should have stopped this many, many hours ago. So he made a face and took that cube. While many sarcastic replies cycled around his processor, but he decided not to say anything of them. Instead he merely fueled as Jazz watched to make sure he did.

“I’m not a mechling.” Prowl gave finally, once he finished.

Jazz put hands on hipflare and took a jaunty stance, “Then stop actin’ like one.”

Prowl vented, a hand to face. “I should have anticipated that.” He gave forlornly.

“Ya just tired, Prowler.” Jazz gave with sympathy, and a warm smile. “But we ain’t done yet. Ya gonna recharge too.” To further this, Jazz leaned in and grabbed Prowl’s arm. Pulled the mech and thus coaxed him into standing.

“But..”

Jazz was firm, “No. Ya gonna recharge. It’s calm right now. Ya gotta rest while there’s the chance. Otherwise it’s gonna be bad on alla us.”

Prowl’s wings sank as he allowed Jazz to march him home to his little habitat near the prime. There was a guard outside the door showing

that Bluestream was surely home. Hopefully recharging.

The mech at the door saluted casually and smiled, “Smokescreen’s with him. Be quiet.”

Inside the front room was dark. Not bothering to turn the lights on, Prowl navigated through the furnishings without issue and sought his own room. It had been a while since he’d recharged there. Due to Bluestreaks troubles, he had been recharging with the mechling. When he recharged at any rate. As the door opened he realized he wasn’t alone. Jazz was still at his heels. Pausing at the door, he smirked, “Making sure to tuck me in?” Asked in a whisper.

Jazz’s visor and biolights were about the only thing visible on him here in the dark. “Ya bet I am.” His field touched lightly, gently.

Indignant a moment, Prowl paused there, frowning. His wings worked, showing he was thinking. Then Prowl looked away and simply went inside. How could he be mad?

So in they went, and Prowl lay himself down on the berth. He stretched out on his side, allowing his wings to remain free. Didn’t much like recharging on his back. Thus back to wall and looking to Jazz, he reached out as Jazz sat on the edge to lay his hand on the saboteur’s forearm. “Stay?” He had no idea why he made that offer, and he prayed Jazz didn’t take it the wrong way.

Lucky for him, Jazz didn’t. While surprised, the Polyhexian smiled. And it was a real smile, not the practiced one he normally showed the world. “Sure.”

Once Jazz had settled in, close, Prowl drifted off into recharge. Jazz surprised himself by doing much the same.

Chapter 9: Strange Bedfellows

The warnings came too late.

Warnings had come, for Cybertron was a spacefaring culture, but that didn't change the out come.

Dozens of mechs selflessly sacrificed themselves by suiciding against the onslaught. Their designations would not be known for a long period due to the chaos, the destruction, but in time they would be remembered. Their selflessness saved billions of lives.

Even if on Cybertron it didn't feel as such. Their efforts not even visible from planetside.

The invasion began with a tiny meteor shower on Kaon, and now it swung into full gear with a deluge of rock. One of the most devastating attacks that could be done from space to a world.. bombardment. When you simply slung rocks at a planet and let gravity take care of the rest. It was not a tactic one used on a world one wanted to occupy, and so this was even more confusing than the initial cloud. For a Cybertron who didn't even know who was invading, this made no sense.

Cybertron would survive it, if by the grace of those willing to give their lives, but not easily. Boulders the size of small moons, the fragments of others splintered by sacrifices of lives and ships, rained down over Cybertron. Whole regions were lost.

What little space fairing fleet the Autobots had, lead by Ultra Magnus, mobilized and set out to stop the attack. No one would hear from them for a long time after.

Millions died that night, and during the days that followed.

Prowl woke with a start as Jazz barged into the room where he and Bluestreak recharged. His wings flared, but he knew the Polyhexian and so was merely puzzled, "Jazz?"

There was no greeting, no playful banter. "We gotta get down to the bunkers. No questions, leave everything. Move." His field was so tight that Prowl couldn't feel it at all.

Bluestreak woke for the voice and questioned with a sleepy sound, lifting his helm from the berth padding. Prowl slid off that berth, “Come, we must hurry.” His voice was quiet and calm, even if he felt anything but. “Something is happening and we must find suitable shelter.”

Bluestreak’s optics went huge for that. He gripped Prowl’s arm and clung there. “Don’t go.”

Prowl’s field stressed assurances, shouting to be heard. He couldn’t reach the mechling otherwise. “I will not leave you.” He give with such conviction that the mechling believed.

Jazz was motioning for them to hurry. “Blue.. we gotta go!”

Trembling already, Bluestreak nodded, and off they went.

The halls of the Prime’s Spire were quiet, but Jazz didn’t take them towards the base. Instead he literally transformed in his hurry and raced off. Prowl bushed Bluestreak after him, “Transform!” The mechling did, and with Prowl on his bumper, the two Praxians followed as best they could. Prowl had never been go the sections Jazz was racing through, but he trusted the other. Jazz would not lead them to death. Not willingly at any rate. Prowl found it all surreal. These halls were barren of even location signs, never mind the small touches that had been added in the corridors of their living area to make it a bit homey. This place was functional, ugly. Stripped of the gaudy materials it had once worn, then never reworked.

As Jazz reached a secured doorway the whole building shook. Screeching to halts, Bluestreak screamed in fear. Prowl transformed up, and put his hands on the hood of the mechling. “It’s alright. There’s time. We won’t leave you.”

Even ignoring his normal showing off, Jazz transformed and hastily entered in a code for the door. Beyond was a stairway that had seen better days. “Go!” Debris rained down even as the three mechs hurried through that door.

They were two stories down when the collapse started. Spared being imprisoned in a collapse a second time by sheer luck, the three threw themselves down the stairs at breakneck speed. The collapse stopped, cutting off their return. They didn’t do more than glance back as they continued their hurry to the bottom.

Prowl could make out the sounds of explosions as they reached the

bottom. It wasn't just against the prime's spire. "What's going on?!" Demanded as his comms were dead.

Jazz moved into maintenance passages that only smaller mechs could use. Ducking slightly even at his smaller size. "Bombardment from space. That's all we know."

Stumbling for that, Prowl fumbled for words as well. The possibilities were so dire that he crashed on the spot, trying to both calculate the variables, and react emotionally.

Thankfully he staggered into Bluestreak, who caught him. "Jazz! He's crashing!"

"Frag!" Was the last thing Prowl heard.

He booted to find himself in Bluestreak's arms seconds later. While he was grateful it was seconds, that didn't change the pounding in his helm. A crash such as this didn't completely stop the mech, but without a solid twelve hours of recharge he was severely debilitated. This sadly included speech. "...Sorry." Was all he could manage at that moment. Prowl's normally quiet voice a bare whisper at the moment.

Jazz, crouched near by, arms over knees, touched fields in concern. "We can't stay here, Prowler. Can ya move? Walk?"

Venting heavily, focused on relaxing his aching frame, the Praxian gave, "Speech: poor. ….Walk: yes."

Bluestreak was trembling. "He's hurt.. We need a medic."

Jazz shifted his weight to grip Bluestreak's forearm. "There ain't no medics here, sweet spark. We gotta go find one, and we can't carry Prowl. Ya gotta guild him, yeah? Like ya did before."

While terrified, Bluestreak nodded. "Okay."

There was no more racing after that. With his tactical distanced from his processor by the crash, Prowl felt extremely off kilter and sluggish. His vision was hazy, and he had trouble creating coherent thoughts. Yet he could walk with guidance, and that's what he did.

His chronometer non functional, Prowl had no idea where they were, or what time it was. He was surprised when Jazz called for a rest, and

Bluestreak eased him down to the dirty pavement. The tunnels they were moving through were dim and filthy. Used to vaulted ceilings that could easily host shuttlemechs, these passes were cramped and decidedly claustrophobic. Yet he sat without issue, grateful for the rest. A tiny room had been chosen for this stop. A way station in an endless maze of corridors.

Jazz was there before him, lifting his face. The Polyhexian didn't like what he saw there. "There anything I can do, Prowler?"

Prowl forced himself to blink, then shook his helm slowly, carefully to show no. "Re..charge." He managed to articulate, albeit with trouble.

There was a frown of puzzlement. "Recharge?"

Bluestreak nodded, settling in with an arm around Prowl. "When he crashes badly he needs recharge. It resets everything. The medics like him in medical when it happens though."

Jazz rubbed at his own chin guard and considered. "Prowler.. get that recharge. I need ya able ta focus when we get to the surface. This spot is safe-ish."

Bluestreak protested with, "But what about Optimus? The others?"

Jazz put on his grin and placed a hand on Bluestreak's pauldron. "They're safe, ma mech. I promise. I came back for ya. We gotta get to them now, yeah? Let Prowler here recharge, then we can get to the prime."

While Bluestreak was uncomfortable with this, Prowl didn't have any real choice. He stretched out on his side, helm pillowed with an arm, and powered himself down.

Jazz watched him do so. "I wish I could do that." Recharge did not come easily to the Polyhexian.

His chronometer still wasn't functioning properly when he woke many hours later. There was a deep ache inside his processor too, but Prowl was well familiar with such things. His wings booted, and he scanned the area. Jazz was gone, and Bluestreak was lightly recharging. Curled against him as was normal.

Prowl took the quiet moment to settle his frame. Crashes always left him feeling rung out like a deflated tire after a bad tumble. Error messages were dismissed from his hud, and the surroundings scanned. Everything was quiet except for the scouting of a glitchmouse not too far away. With his comms still offline, Prowl lifted a hand and pet Bluestreak's helm.

That sadly woke Bluestreak with a start, but he thankfully didn't freak. "You're awake!" He gushed instead, flied flooding with relief. "Jazz went scouting. Are you okay? He said I should give you some energon." Sure it was all spoke at top speed, the words running together, but that was okay.

"I ache." Was admitted softly, "But I am myself again." Prowl gave honestly.

They had managed to get Prowl fueled by the time Jazz returned to them. The saboteur was a silent shadow that didn't show himself until he was nearly on them. "How ya feelin', Prowler?"

Bluestreak started again with a gasp, and huddled miserably against his elder. Prowl slid an arm around the mechling, field giving whispered assurances. He so couldn't be loud today and hated that. "I function. That said, I am hardly at my best."

Jazz nodded, hating the necessity, but unspooled a jack from his wrist and offered it to the tactician. "I need ta give ya this intel. They've got the whole city covered in nanites. Sure we got protections, but lots don't. That means pools of Sharkticons and changed mechs. Could ya plot us a path out?"

This soon after a crash, Prowl was highly susceptible to others. The news did not sit well. All of Iacon? Yet he merely nodded and took that jack. "I can." And he did. Uploading the map and data Jazz had managed somehow, he coupled it with a map of Iacon he already had. Long moments spend by as he worked out possibilities. He managed to plot an awkward path through the city. It would be neither easy, nor safe.

Jazz spent the time on Bluestreak's other side, cuddling on the mechling. Keeping him distracted. It did Bluestreak a lot of good to be huddled between the pair.

"I have a path." Prowl announced as he returned to himself.

Jazz nodded, once he'd been given a copy of the modified map. "Then

we go." The Polyhexian didn't even question what that path may be.

They were two days in those tunnels. Working through and around collapses, or other blockages like locked doors not on the maps. Thankfully the tunnels were not filled with sewage even if they were still cramped and entirely uncomfortable. Prowl didn't know where Jazz got the energon they used each day, and he never questioned, but it seemed endless. He rested between the two mechs when they stopped, grateful for them, but was sadly on the cusp of another crash by the time they reached the surface.

The tunnels had been safe excepting for some critters that Jazz knew how to deal with, but topside was another issue. Due to a collapse they had to access the surface for a time. A surface already ghosted with the fog-like cloud they had been fighting for months. It wasn't a full spread as it had been in Kaon, but it was getting there. Left everything eerie and seeming disjointed. Especially since it had been consuming buildings to increase its own size, and make Sharkticons. As Jazz and Bluestreak pulled him the final few feet out of a hole made by that collapse, Prowl hunkered down and looked at it all in dismay. The cloud was not a threat to the three of them by itself thanks to the nanites created by Wheeljack and Perceptor, but the creatures it created were.

Jazz flashed a grin at them both, "Stay low, stay quiet, and follow me."

The city of lights was now a dark place. That it was night, and one couldn't see the stars, didn't help a bit. There were the sounds of metal protesting under the weight of collapses, the dribble of debris as it fell, and worst of all was the laughter. Somewhere, well off, a mech's crazed laughter could be heard.

As he help Bluestreak's hand, Prowl was grateful that laughter was fading into the distance.

They had roughly time enough to cross a street, and duck into some cover, when danger found them. Or at least was close to finding them.

A gathering of sharkticons spilled out from between two ruins, rough housing with one another. It was nearly like watching cybercat kittens at play. If you imagined kittens as bulbous white spheres with teeth and comical, skinny limbs. Only the sharkticons had no regard for the harm they did one another. Ungainly and awkward, newly built, the

creatures got distracted by something under some rubble and began digging at it.. until one of their number caught scent of the three mechs hiding.

The sharkticon stopped digging, ignoring the others slinging debris at it as they continued digging. It had chosen a random spot away from it's fellows that didn't allow it to find anything. Thus it was easily distracted. It turned itself so that it could snuffle at the air. Slowly, it began wandering near where Jazz was crouched.

Jazz tensed when its fellows lost interest in the dig and began to follow. The sharkticons snapped at one another, even harming one another, but this didn't stop their searching.

Prowl slid a hand over Bluestreak's mouth to keep the mechling quiet. He held to Bluestreak tightly, and tried to ignore the trembling of the form in his arms.

Then a tremendous roar bellowed out, and something dark crashed into the main gathering of sharkticons, sending most tumbling. Out right crushing two under large peds.

It was a mech. Or what had once been a mech. Huge in size and now warped beyond measure. The mech's original plating at once been a light color, but now it was covered in black scales of some sort that only gave glimpses of the plating below.

The whole beast took on two legs, but hunched some, as if the transformation to beast had nearly succeeded, but then failed. He had huge lower teeth that jutted out from an enlarged jaw, and his heavy brow shaded the glowing embers of red optics. Was even complete with terrible horns sweeping back from his helm temple area. With huge paws, the fingers tipped in wicked claws, it smacked the sharkticons to their deaths. Casually.

Most the sharkticons immediately scrambled for their lives, in different directions. Disappearing into the fog. One remained and soon died messily.

The mech snorted at the sharkticons, huffing in the aftermath. His fans working hard for a brief period. All waited there, the smaller mechs terrified and not daring to move. Even Jazz, holding a blaster, prayed for no trouble. That said he was ready for it.

Straightening some, working out a crick in his neck, the huge mech turned to look directly at where the three were hiding. He walked

over as casually. As if there wasn't a nanite cloud, as if there weren't Sharkticons, and as if Cybertron hadn't been bombarded. A very large hand settled down on the top of their hiding place with a thump. He leaned over to peer inside. "So." His voice was rough, yet strangely conversational. "Jazz. I'd say it was a pleasure seeing you again, but that would be a lie." The grin that spread over Megatron's features wasn't the least bit friendly. "Be a dear and take me to Starscream."

Prowl's optics went dark as another crash claimed him.

Chapter 10: The enemy of my enemy

Prowl returned to himself as he was being laid down. His processor was rich with pain, and nothing was responding properly. There were error messages all over his HUD. He felt so lousy he even left them there. Moaning softly, he knew by color and biolights that Jazz was pulling him in close, but there was little he could do about it. The saboteur's field against his was a welcome balm.

A second crash in as many days, was too much for him to handle well even at the best of times. This was not the best of times.

"Prime always was soft." Megatron growled mockingly about those who worked for Optimus as he straightened from placing Prowl down. The big mech had been carrying him for some time now. Yet Jazz noticed the would be warlord handled the Praxian gently.

Jazz didn't rise to the mockery, and instead did his best to check the Prowl over. He knew it wasn't good. Prowl wasn't able to focus his optics at all. His wings twitched randomly. Physically the Praxian was in good shape in spite of the dirt he wore, but Jazz knew that another crash could cripple him or worse. Prowl desperately needed a medic. "Can ya talk?" Was asked quietly.

Prowl simply shuttered his optics a time and tried to express through fields that he couldn't.

Jazz was one of the rare few who could feel Prowl's field before Ratchet had made changes, which meant he could feel this now. "Megatron.. these two are civilians. Ya gotta let them go."

Crouching near by, ominous looking and huge, Megatron dropped his gaze back to the smaller mechs. "Let them go to their deaths? Look around you. Would they survive?" He motioned a massive hand at the surroundings. While they were in a building, it was in poor shape. The cloud was lurking in corners. It wafted and flowed like there was a tide. "What kind of mech do you take me for? Right now you and I are all that keeps them alive. They come with us."

As much as Jazz was surprised, and as much as he hated it, he knew Megatron was right. Prowl wouldn't survive this alone, even if Bluestreak might. He kept his field close however, and didn't share this with Megatron. Merely give the big mech a cool look. "Convenient that effort to protect."

It was convenient, wasn't it? Megatron merely smiled at the saboteur.

Jazz pulled Prowl in close, hating this with his whole being.

Unable to stop himself, Prowl slipped into a fitful recharge.

Megatron remained near by, dark and brooding. He was a good watch dog however, and his sheer presence kept other dangers away. There had been one small group of Sharkticons who poked in, only to scramble away for being growled at. The Decepticon held no fear of the creatures.

Jazz waited a while, holding the recharging Prowl, trying to keep Bluestreak comforted. The mechling was finally recharging as well. Iacon was an ethereal place right out of nightmares, complete with distant screams. Jazz was glad Bluestreak couldn't hear them. "Who's doin' this ta us, Megatron?"

Lounging near the only entrance to this nook, Megatron had taken up that position to discourage the random sharkticons wandering in over the hours. For some reason the mechanimals fled from the mere sight of him. They attacked anyone, anything, unchanged. One arm draped over a knee, the warped mech looked over at the trio. The question brought about a sound of disgust. "Autobots." He spat. Don't even know who they are fighting.

While it wasn't obvious, this was difficult on the Decepticon. He had been ground zero when this started, and now he was at the epicenter of another city being dismantled by nanites. Being changed into something else. The agonizes of mechs far off, their screams and horror, weighed on his thoughts. Being inside the cloud was a haunted and evil place. It brought so many unwanted memories of his own people's pain.

Jazz pursed his lips at the miner turned Decepticon leader. His look turned flat and disapproving.

Megatron laughed at it, not admitting he was impressed at the small mech's bravery. Optimus did know how to pick good mechs, that was sure. But Megatron didn't mean to ignore the question entirely. The Autobot legitimately had no idea who was doing this? "Quintessons." He gave with a grunt. There was no reason to hide that fact. The civil war was over. Now was the time for all mechs to ensure their freedom.

The word meant little to Jazz. Quintessons? The Polyhexian struggled

with memory, frowning. The word niggled at him, for he had heard it before. But where? Not recently, surely.

The mech he had been holding for hours stirred at this. “Ancient history.” Prowl murmured. “Invaded Cybertron. Enslaved the population.”

Jazz brightened for that voice, “Prowler!”

Prowl looked, and felt in field, terrible, but Jazz ignored that. Instead he helped the Praxian sit up. Jazz remained close, supporting the other. Prowl slumped forward some, wings hanging lifeless. He could neither spare the energy, not the processing, for them now. “The bombardment.. why? Invasion?”

Familiar with glitched mechs, Megatron remained lounged as he considered what to say in reply. His whole army was practically filled with the glitched. The Decepticons had turned many supposed faults into strengths. If only because beggars couldn’t be choosy. “Because they are insane I suppose.” Was given finally, the large mech shrugging massive pauldrons. “This is an experiment, not an invasion.”

Jazz could tell by the stillness of the frame he held that Prowl was computing. “Prowler.. stop. We don’t got the data ya need.”

Prowl murmured something inaudible, lost inside his processor, until Bluestreak meeped in fear. That brought Prowl near immediately back to himself.

Megatron, having moved at speed, and near total silence, was crouched close. Looming over the trio. Casually, and without any real fear, he moved Jazz’s blaster muzzle out of his face. He didn’t try to take the weapon however. “Tactical.” Murmured with a spreading smile. “Plot us to Starscream, Prowler.”

That brought the white helm to lift and the Praxian’s wings lifted aggressively as he came to look at the Decepticon. “My designation is Prowl.” Quiet were those words, dangerous.

The three ignored Bluestreak until the mechling tried to push at Megatron. “Stop being mean! He needs a medic!” The young mech all but climbed over his elders to get between them and Megatron. His field was all jagged edges and his optics narrowed.

Not that the push could really move Megatron, but it brought

Bluestreak to be the center of attention.

Then Megatron was laughing. It was a rough sound, yet held no mockery. The Decepticon's own field brushed at the mechling's soothingly. Placating. "Easy, young one. Easy. As distasteful as I find it, the war is on hold. Perhaps even over. I will not harm either of them, I promise."

Bluestreak wasn't quite convinced, but his processor was reminding him not too gently just what he was facing down. At Jazz's gentle tug, the mechling settled back down to where the Polyhexian could slide an arm around him. Prowl managed to grip his hand. His doorwings shifted back and down to a more submissive posture.

Jazz was more focused on Megatron however. "Ya mean that?"

Megatron hesitated, looking more serious, then nodded. "We must find Starscream if we are to survive."

Prowl's wings too finally sunk back down, "What does Starscream carry?"

The big mech shifted, rubbing at his chin as he considered. Megatron hated working with Autobots, but knew it to be necessary. He had known the moment he survived his Quintesson induced transformation. "The Quintesson invasion plan. Such as there is one. While there is little true plan, it gives many details we need in defeating them. They are without any great cohesion as an army and can be easily divided. Our problem is that we are now trying to recover after great trauma, and their technologies greatly out weigh or own."

Jazz was quiet wondering how Megatron came by all this, but Prowl's tactical was burning hard. Mostly due to the lack of true data. He desperately needed updates from satellites that he couldn't reach for weather patterns and cloud movements, intelligence reports of attacks, and especially the data Starscream apparently held. His helm bowed with it.

Until a huge hand settled to the back of it. Megatron could crush him effortlessly, but that was never the intention. Wings twitched, trying to react. There was a grunt from the Decepticon, "He's looping. It's causing him to over heat." Said with firm confidence. "Assassin.. can you jack in and cut the chains? He can't afford another crash."

Jazz's field didn't shift, remaining calm and collected, but oh that

rankled. He wasn't an assassin. No matter if Megatron said it. Not that it hadn't been suggested by Autobot command. Optimus had firmly quashed any such ideas. But Jazz didn't rise to the bait and merely nodded. Shifting Prowl, he unspooked his wrist cable. "Ya gotta let me in, Prowler."

It took some coaxing by rubbing at the spot, but a port opened at the Praxian's collar bone and was immediately jacked into. Prowl didn't even realize that Megatron had shifted to support his weight so that Jazz could work. The Decepticon dropped to one knee, and cradled the smaller mech in an arm.

Jazz reeled, mentally and physically, for what he encountered within. Bluestreak caught him, but he barely felt it. Mentally it was like being crippled and tossed into the middle of the Iacon express way during peak use. Other mechs, other vehicles, so close that the force of their passage tossed him about. The effect was purely mental, but he'd never jacked with Prowl before. Had never felt the full force of the mind within. And right now Prowl was in no condition to be able to soften that blow.

Bowing his helm, Jazz vented hard and focused inwardly. To drive his attention past the raw data battering his mind, and into the true code beyond. It was nothing like he wanted, but he slid himself in between some critical points and roughly dropped the Praxian into stasis.

Jazz didn't even hear Bluestreak protest for Prowl going slack, but Megatron's deep rumble was felt through his struts. Later on he would remember and be disturbed by the gentleness in that rough voice. But then mechlings did that to all kinds of mechs.

Huffing, fans kicking in hard, Jazz shuttered his unseen optics and repaired the slight damage he'd caused in dropping Prowl to stasis. Yet he kept the mech there as he sought out the data loop that Prowl had been trapped in. A boot wouldn't correct that. Not with the memory he knew Prowl had. The tactical net inside that helm didn't easily let data go. Jazz had watched Ratchet fight with it for hours over something minor, and fail to clear it. Ratchet wasn't one to enjoy compromise medically, but the tactical won.

So now Jazz didn't try to remove anything, but he did alter the data. Since he knew he couldn't simply delete the lines, he cut them in certain areas, and made sure that cut saved. It would mean a cleaner boot, and Prowl would be free of the loop.

At the limits of his knowledge of this kind of code, Jazz withdrew. He could hack a mech if there were no other options, but that wasn't his goal. Hacking Prowl was not something he planned to ever do. Even with how much he'd been lying to himself about his feelings.

"I can't do more." Jazz gave roughly as he withdrew.

Bluestreak gripped his arm as Jazz pulled his jack free. "Is he going to be alright?" Having lost one mentor mere months ago, the mechling was terrified.

There was a firm nod, "Yeah, Blue. I promise."

The mechling's lower lip trembled, but then Bluestreak nodded.

Megatron, his assurances spent, shifted and gathered Prowl into his arms. "We have rested enough. Jazz, we must reach Starscream. As much as I would prefer a plotted path, you will have to do."

Once Megatron stood, he had Bluestreak there fussing over Prowl a little. In spite of rolling his optics, he actually complied and arranged the in stasis Praxian's wings to a more comfortable position.

Jazz had no idea what to make of all this, but he was glad for it. If he were to get the two to safety, he would need a great deal of help.

Almost like a mechanimal with young at its heels, Megatron strode out into the mists.

The big mech did have a question however. "Jazz.. why is it that even after sending one of my commanders to you that you don't have this data?"

Jazz opened, then closed his mouth. That was something he was thinking about too. Admitting that that prime was naive and stubborn, to Megatron no less, wasn't something he wanted to do.

Chapter 11: The Prime

Chapter Notes

Not sure I can keep this pace up, but enjoy it while it lasts. :)

And again, thank you, everyone who commented! You really make my day when you do.

"….Let me get this straight."

Megatron had stopped in the middle of an expressway to loom over Jazz. The area was intensely eerie, covered in nanite cloud. The mist moved as if it were alive - flowing, wafting and waning by some unknown drive. It was all around them, leaving a tiny clearing on which they stood. To one side was the dark shadow of what must have been a tram car. The rails for such ran along side the express way. Now on its side, cracked and crashed. They hadn't seen anything living for quite some time.

"I sent you my fastest mech, covered in the very thing that has clearly saved you, so that Cybertron could be saved… AND YOU LEFT HIM IN STASIS?!"

Jazz stood under the verbal onslaught, none too pleased. That hadn't been his choice. In fact he'd argued for the chance to boot Starscream, to go through his code, to check subspace… All of which had been denied.

Before Jazz would formulate some words, Prowl began laughing. It was a soft, breathy sound, but since Megatron was holding him, the big mech heard it just fine. "What?" Was growled at the Praxian.

"Don't waste your energy. That wasn't Jazz's decision." Prowl gives in his quiet voice. The Praxian had been in stasis until then, so his speaking was something of a surprise. "He fought to do as you are so pointlessly screaming at him for." Behind them both, Bluestreak was watching in worry.

Megatron grunted, and let out an exasperated huff as he straightened. Holding Prowl cradled against his hood in one arm, the mech put his other hand on a hip. From there he looked sourly down on Jazz. "Is that true?"

Looking away, Jazz gave a simple, curt nod.

The war was still fresh, and Megatron still young. He had yet to make the leap from revolutionary to greed crazed warlord. Not that this would have been far off sadly. Yet that path was now destroyed, and he was finding new footing. Megatron had many bad qualities, but he did want Cybertron free. And he was smart enough, self aware enough, to realize he couldn't do it alone. "Then why is it we are dealing with this?" Asked roughly, him motioning his free hand at everything.

This was why Jazz looked away. "..." Oh, he knew the reasons. Knew them and had argued them, but everything came down to a dear friend he loved. One he didn't easily speak ill of.

Someone Prowl could speak ill of. "Optimus is naive. Not to attempt to lessen any of this horror, but he sought only to respect Starscream. Respect you. We have all paid much for that."

There was no protest from Jazz.

Megatron dragged a hand down his face, long claws scraping the metal, but leaving no mark. He made a rough sound, his field flashing and snapping. The mech wanted to kill Optimus so badly! Yet he also knew that would have to wait. Finally the glowing embers of his optics settled on Prowl. "You are no civilian." Not a question. "Yet you are a glitch..." Prowl didn't wear the Aubobot symbol.

A glitch was the lowest of the low in a Functionist society. A mech who couldn't fulfill his function had no purpose, and so no place. Just how did a glitch come to be among the inner circle of a prime?

"I am." Prowl gave back calmly, quietly. "Optimus has outlawed Functionism. I proved my worth and he stood with me against the old guard."

Jazz rubbed at his mouth and chinguard, trying to keep himself calm. "Optimus is.." There was a pause during which he looked back up to the looming gladiator. Someone who had once again been terribly abused in regards of his current frame. Jazz was very aware of that. "He needs ya, mech." The words surprised him somewhat, but he kept talking. "I know ya two got issues, but he's surrounded by the worst, while doin' his best. An right now his best ain't good enough." It felt like a betrayal, but Jazz knew Optimus too was young. Young and naive enough not to listen to those mechs around him who wouldn't lie to further themselves.

Megatron was about to reply when Bluestreak desperately smacked the back of his leg for attention.
Turning himself around to even be able to look down at the mechling, he followed Bluestreak's pointing finger to where something was lumbering up out of the mists.

Megatron put Prowl gently on his peds, "To the tram." The one that lay hear by. "Hide, but be prepared. If Sharkticons join in, they can and will find you."

As unsettling as everything was, Jazz found Megatron's care most unsettling of all. He hurried to the Praxian, and with Bluesteak helping, they guided Prowl to the scant shelter that a crashed tram car had to offer.

Inside Prowl settled down into a crouch, wings low. "I.. have to diminish my emotional involvement, or I'll crash again." His field felt low, and of apology.

Jazz looked at him sharply. "What's that mean?!"

Prowl assured, "It's temporary. My crashes are caused by emotional data conflicting with the tactical network. If I dim my emotional outputs there's no chance of crash. It leaves me running on pure logic however. I can't make decisions properly in that state. You will have to order me what to do."

Jazz's optics were wide with that. It sounded horrifying to him. To disable a part of who you were. "Ya ain't got no other way, Prowler?"

The Praxian looked terrible still. Hours of rest had done little to diminish the stress he was under. "Not at the moment. I am sorry, Jazz."

Bluestreak gripped his arm in both hands, "Will it hurt you?"

Prowl assured, "Not at all. I still require medical care, Bluestreak. They can reset everything. A good reboot will have me back to normal. Until then I will be.. not myself. Like a drone. I will not be able to give emotional support. I am sorry."

Neither liked it, but Jazz nodded, "Do it. Make sure ya live, Prowler." He didn't dare let himself say more. Anything like 'we need you' would have given away what was really growing between them.

Prowl nodded and physically there was no change. Field wise,

however, he grew bland. Placid. As if this were a true drone. Prowl's faint tremble ceased as he pulled out a rare pellet gun. It shot acid spheres instead of the normal plasma blasts. This was carefully loaded.

Jazz gripped Prowl's pauldron. "Protect Blue. We remain hidden unless we gotta fight."

Outside Megatron wasn't paying attention to the trio at all. He was standing near the tram, watching as a warped mech limped out of the mists. The transformation of the nanites had gone badly, as it had with Megatron, but the mech who approached hadn't been able to keep his mind.

One leg was normal size and shape for a mech, the other three thick and heavy. It made the creature partially lame since the ped on that side couldn't touch the ground. It was the only thing on him that showed what he once was. The rest was grotesque. Malformed with dark hide and rough spikes everywhere. One blue optic gleamed inside the dark sockets, and a long muzzle was filled with teeth. It was difficult to tell color in the half light of the mists.

Seeing Megatron waiting for him, the creature roared and rushed at the other. Cricking his neck with a strange patience, Megatron held his ground until the proper moment, before rushing forward to meet that warped mech. They crashed together, a strange combination of metals and organics.

Focusing on the lame leg, Megatron used his own weight and momentum to send them both tumbling away from the tram car.

The fight was as brief as it was brutal. The mech he fought hadn't been trained in combat, and Megatron was the champion of Karn. The pair skidded to a stop on the pavement of the expressway, the warped mech beneath. Megatron dug powerful claws into the chest of the other and tore the torso apart. Energon and other gore splattered him as he reached in to crush the mech's spark. He had experienced worse in Karn during the opening stages of this lunacy and knew this was the only peace he could give the other. Once changed, once driven mad, there was no way to restore.

Death was the only kindness he could give.

Even as the spark went dark, Megatron lifted his helm at the sound of blaster fire. He climbed the corpse he had made, perching on the stop of it, and saw Sharkticons circling the tram.

Leaping off, Megatron grabbed for a rear leg and began dragging the huge corpse towards the tram. It took everything he had but he managed to lob it a short distance. The corpse hit and slid to come to rest against the tram car, making it shake. Sharkticons all around scrambled, then came back to dig into the warped mech frame. Megatron was then there at the opening the other three had entered by. He kicked a sharkticon corpse out of view. “Hurry. We don’t have much time.”

Bluestreak was pushed towards him so came out first. Jazz pushed Prowl next and Megatron scooped the Praxian up gun and all. “Transform and drive. I will follow.”

“But!” Bluesteak managed, only to be silenced with a sharply pointing finger.

Jazz pulled at the mechling and threw himself into alt mode. The two tore off, past the feasting sharkticons, as fast as their wheels could carry them. Megatron ran after, carrying Prowl. He couldn’t transform as he was.

Jazz didn’t let them go too far however. He slowed, avoiding some pot holes that went clear through the pavement, calling to Bluestreak, “Let’s wait. Don’t transform.” Together they halted there on the dark, empty expressway. Bluestreak’s engine whined as he felt of worry for everything. Jazz used his field to soothe the mechling. “We’re okay, Blue. We’re almost there.”

And then Megatron came running up to them, the mists swirling around him. His ped steps heavy and yet still lost to the mists. Prowl had put the gun away somewhere during that run. He was untroubled by the mess he was now wearing thanks to close contact with Megatron.

The big mech slowed and stopped, fans running hard along his frame. “We can’t stay here.” He huffed at the Autobot and mechling.

Jazz assured, “We ain’t far. We take the off ramp down a ways, then hit the sewers, and it’s right there.”

Prowl gave with out inflection. “The nanite cloud is more concentrated here. The ramp is likely damaged. There will also be more patrols of Sharkticons.”

Megatron grunted, looking around warily. “We have to risk it. Come.” Motioned for Jazz, who took off again. The Polyhexian kept his speed

modest, careful for the bad road, yet Megatron could still keep up at a run. That was daunting. He decided to never underestimate Megatron.

Chapter 12: Awkward

The offramp that Jazz had been looking for was entirely gone. The group wasn't surprised due to the poor condition of the expressway itself up until that point. They backtracked to a spot that grazed some remaining building tops, and Jazz produced a good length of cable from his subspace. No one questioned it.

Jazz made a harness around Prowl with one end, after the other had been firmly fixed to the remaining expressway. Then Megatron lowered Prowl and Jazz down to the rooftop below. Jazz hung on behind Prowl, ready for trouble, having done this kind of thing many times before. Prowl decided not to ask. They both were very careful on landing, making sure the rooftop was stable. It wasn't terribly, but it would get them by.

Jazz went first, testing his footing. Then helped Prowl out of the harness. Together they tottered their careful way over the crumbling roof to the stairs down. Once Megatron had lowered Bluestreak, the mechling hurried to them, and all three moved down and out of sight. Prowl whispered, "What of Megatron?"

Jazz wouldn't let any of them stop, for the structure was coming apart even as they moved. Wafts of the nanite cloud could be seen in spots. "He can handle it. We can't."

Megatron himself slid down the line, holding at the bottom, uncertain if his greater weight would collapse things. He gave the smaller mechs long minutes before dropping down. The roof gave beneath him near immediately. It started off small, a hush of collapse, and then cascaded into a vast rush towards the ground. In a mad, desperate scramble, he leapt for the cable that hung still, and managed to grab it. Swinging wildly, his spark pulsing, the mech watched as the whole building slid down and to the side. Right into another building near by, taking that down too. A great cloud of dust and debris rose from this, leaving him with no way to see what lay below.

Unfortunately it left him with little way of knowing what he was dropping into. Or what had become of the trio of mechs he had been following to shelter. More than anything he was frustrated. They had every chance to escape from him now.

So dangling there, he swayed a time, taking in his options. Another building, this one still standing, was barely visible through the haze.

Megatron began swinging. It took him real effort to time the swings and get the best length he could. Then when the time was right he lept from the rope and used the momentum to send him crashing into the other building's side. It held better than the first. If marginally.

He rolled into the berth room of a habitat, sending crumbling furnishings flying. Wasting no time, Megatron shook off the debris he was wearing after righting himself, and slid down the outside wall of the apartment block to the ground. He ignored the hurt any of this caused. The gleam of energon was on his arm when he reached the bottom. Pain was an old, long familiar companion.

Moving away from the building in long strides, leaping up to other rubble so that he could scramble over, Megatron picked a direction and hoped for the best. It lead him to what must have been the coutyard before these buildings, whole and collapsed alike. It was now covered in debris. Some that was already disappearing to the nanite cloud.

Then he caught a gleam of blue in the haze.

It lead him to Jazz, waiting for him. "Ya need a patch?" The Polyhexian asked. "I don't got much medical care, but got a little."

Megatron looked down on the Autobot a time. His thoughts unshared. "We need to move. This will draw attention we can't afford."

Jazz hesitated a moment before nodding. He decided not to press. "This way." Nodding his helm back to where he left Bluestreak and Prowl.

The Praxians were hidden well, and only came out at Jazz's assurance. Prowl once more held that strange pellet gun. While curious if the mech would survive all this, Megatron didn't ask. There was no point. Patience would give him his answer in time.

The group slipped into the mists even as sharkticons were converging on the collapse site. The rumbles and snuffles of another warped mech had them all mindful of the sounds they were making, and quietly the four left it all behind.

Jazz lead them to a maintenance tunnel entrance not far from where the down ramp had been. The hatch was easily opened by Megatron, and they all dropped down inside. It was a dirty place, but not a sewage line. The whole area could have been worse. Megatron was having trouble getting through the top hatch, but it was just big

enough for him to manage. If with some wiggling his pride didn't appreciate.

Not far in, Jazz asked for everyone to stop. No one was doing well by this point. The only thing saving them were the nanites created by Wheeljack fighting the cloud. It left a small radius around them that was safe from the destruction. So all four settled down to the floor right there. Bluestreak slid his arms around Prowl and took what comfort he could there. The lack of field was disturbing, but Prowl's voice and engine sounds were the same, even if there was no inflection in that quiet voice. With some help from Jazz, they managed to coax the mechling into recharge.

Without his emotions, Prowl lacked the means to accurately decide things. When it came to mechs he was lacking in that department to start with, and now he couldn't understand that asking likely wasn't a good thing to do. "Megatron?" He asked, his voice without any inflection at all. "Why did you destroy Praxus?"

In spite of himself Jazz sucked in air, but made himself go still. Right now showing threat to Megatron would likely end badly. He very much tried to shush the Praxian through fields though. This was so not a good thing to ask!

Megatron's engine turned and he growled at the Praxian. Hands curled into fists, almost in spite of the large claws they now bore. There the three held for an uncomfortable time, Megatron baring his denta. Yet the big mech didn't attack. "I didn't." Was given clearly after that long while.

Jazz's visor shifted a shade darker, and he opened his mouth, only to say nothing when Megatron held up a hand for him to stop.

They held there again as Megatron lowered that hand. He then used it to rub at his face. "I must take responsibility, but I never ordered an attack on Praxus. I was in trade agreements with them. We were going to ally… Then one of my command team decided to try and impress me. He used ordinance that I had ordered dismantled due to how dangerous it was, and now Praxus is no more."

It left Jazz stunned. Prowl couldn't feel anything at the moment, but chose to remain silent since Jazz had clearly ordered him to. Jazz gripped Prowl's arm as he struggled with this news. It had been only months, and he couldn't tell if Megatron were lying. "That's a convenient story there, mech." Was given quietly.

“You don’t have to believe.” Megatron gave in a growl, fighting his temper. He flashed his elongated teeth at the pair. “None of you do. I will be blamed for it for eternity regardless of the truth. If the Autobots and remaining government have their way I will pay for it with my life. Yet that doesn’t change the truth itself.” He wanted to lash out, to hit something. Instead the large mech moved, uncanny limbs changed by the nanites to something other. Megatron put a huge hand to the wall directly over Prowl’s pauldron and glared as he got in close. “It would be in your best interest to never ask such things again.” Given low and almost pleasantly.

Prowl lacked the means to react, yet held still as the Decepticon grew so close. The warning was understood even so, and he nodded. “Acknowledged.” His wings didn’t even twitch. Megatron was disappointed the Praxian didn’t pull back from him.

Then Jazz was there, boldly touching Megatron’s pauldron. “Mech, he’s shut down. He can’t react.” Trying to ensure Megatron didn’t attempt more to get a reaction out of Prowl. Jazz could feel Bluestreak clinging to him, trembling, but couldn’t deal with that right now. So much for the mechling getting some much needed recharge.

“Perhaps not.” Megatron gave, sounding as if it didn’t matter. “But he does understand.” Satisfied, the Decepticon pulled back and once more settled down at a small distance from the others.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence after that.

Chapter 13: Resulting Chaos

Chapter Summary

> Jazz, Prowl, Bluestreak, and Megatron finally reach the remaining Autobots.

Chapter Notes

> My deepest apologies for the length of time between chapters. Not only did we have job issues and Covid, but there was a gas leak in my apartment. For months. We were so sick, and had no idea what was going on. Took months more to recover, and that's just from the gas leak. Thankfully Covid hasn't been bad for us. I think we've had it, but none of the truly dangerous symptoms. Not entirely sure though. Been very careful with distancing, masking, and disinfecting. Tomorrow we get our second vaccine shot.
>
> I know this is a bit short as a chapter, but I wanted to get something out.

No one truly had any rest, but Jazz kept them stationary for a few hours. Bluestreak eventually dozed in Prowl's arms as the adults sat together in a miserable huddle. Not even Megatron felt inclined to make trouble. Jazz could tell he was hiding a great deal. What the revolutionary had gone through the last few months Jazz could only guess. He couldn't imagine any of it had been pleasant.

Finally Jazz nudged his little huddle of Praxians to get them to their peds. The passages they were in were narrow, but thankfully tall. Megatron still had to hunch to make his way through. He trailed after the group, claws clicking quietly against the battered metals beneath them, red optics like embers in the gloom created by the nanite cloud.

The large mech wasn't sharing anything, and Jazz often wondered if he hurt.

It was another half a day of tunnel exploration. Megatron was growling softly near constantly due to aggravation of his hunched posture, but Jazz purposely paid him little mind. His concern was with Prowl and Bluestream. They were both having trouble. The saboteur encouraged them when he could, but they all had to be quiet due to the passages showing signs of sharkticons and combat.

Finally Jazz held up a hand for everyone to stop. He motioned for Prowl and Bluestreak to stay where they were so that he could creep forward. The tunnel had been blocked by crates and debris, narrowing the passage down dramatically. It showed signs of combat as well, but no corpses.

The mech's steps made no sound in the tunnels as he peeked around the barracade to spot Sunstreaker and Sideswipe. Both heavily armed and taking cover. They looked extremely bored, which Jazz was grateful for. "Hey.. don't shoot, eh?" Steeling himself, the Polyhexian stepped out, his hands lifted.

The twins tensed, spinning to aim at him, no longer bored, but then Sideswipe blossomed into a smile. "Jazz!"

Sunstreaker was more reserved. "We thought we'd lost you." He gave solemnly, ignoring that Sideswipe elbowed him for his words. "Prime's waiting for you."

Jazz sauntered through the narrow gap, putting on his easy grin. "Got it more complicated than that, mechs. Ya mind if I bring in some guests? The kind I don't want ya shootin' at."

The twins hesitated for the question. Jazz asking such things always meant trouble. "What do you mean.." Sunstreaker gave as an agitated Megatron loomed up over the pile of debris they'd been using for cover. His optics were narrowed and he bared his teeth.

"He means me. Get me prime." The changed mech ordered. Inside the fallback point was too small for the number trying to be there As Megatron made his way inside Sideswipe actually shot the warlord.

It took Jazz a bit to calm things down. "The kind I don't want ya shootin' at..." Was reminded. Thankfully Megatron was feeling generous, and hadn't tried to kill anyone for being shot. It didn't seem to have hurt him anyway thankfully. The twins didn't have much choice as they allowed Megatron inside their fallback base. Such as it was. The place was little more than a sewer maintenance area that had all the entrances blocked off. As Optimus arrived, optics wide at seeing Megatron, Jazz hurried back to where he'd left Prowl and Bluestreak in the passages.

The twins went back to guard duty while Jazz brought the Praxians to medical. The fallback base was tiny and it didn't take them long to reach it. Tiny enough that they could still hear Megatron's voice, even if they couldn't make out the words.

Medical was all of one berth and some cots. Most of which were filled. Ratchet was there, having resisted the urge to rush out for all the screaming, but he was not in the best of moods. “What the frag is going on?!” The medic demanded, hands settling on hip flare. Like so many others, Ratchet too was wounded. There was crimping on the plating of one leg, and his paint was a mess. How he’d managed to clean off might have been considered a superpower.

Jazz got the Praxians to a cot, where they sat. Bluestreak was clinging to Prowl and sniffling. “Sorry, Docbot. Brought home noisy guests. Would ya look at Prowl? He’s crashed twice, then did somethin’ funky so that it wouldn’t happen again..”

That got Ratchet focused on the pair. “Lay down, Prowl.”

Bluestreak was pulled gently away by Jazz so that the elder Praxian could stretch out. Prowl looked exhausted, and the added grime from crossing the city didn’t help. Ratchet used a datapad to jack into the mech. What the medic found there had him swearing, “Frag. Mech..”

Prowl gave quietly, and without any intonation, “I did what was necessary to survive.” His pale optics were dim.

Ratchet vented heavily, “I suppose you did. I’ll need to put you in stasis. May I have your permission to work repairs?

Prowl intoned, “You may.” Considering the medic was the only one he’d known who had actually helped him, there were no doubts about Ratchet now. In seconds the mech was in stasis, his optics shuttered.

Once Prowl was offline, Ratchet frowned at Jazz. “Get the mechling somewhere he can rest. I’ll have to operate, but that has to wait.” Since there was a mech already on the single medical berth available.

Jazz nodded and lead the unhappy Bluestreak away.

Elsewhere, everyone was speaking at once. Megatron had been making claims, Autobots who’d arrived to protect their prime were being sarcastic and rude. In general it was a noisy mess as the older group of Autobots, the strategists and generals, sought to take charge of the situation. Itonhide stood near by, frowning, arms folded over his hood.

Until Optimus bellowed, “ENOUGH!”

It brought a startled silence to the room. Optimus had been a mild mannered prime, and had allowed others to over ride him on many occasions. That had been changing some with Jazz, Ironhide, and Prowl backing him, but this still was not something the generals were used to. Even Megatron stilled, but his demeanor was curious. Maybe a little aroused. Certainly not appropriate for the situation.

“Clear the room.” Optimus straightened , squaring his pauldrons, and pointied sharply to an exit. His pose was an aggressive one. One of the strategists attempted to protest only to visibly cow under the intensely disapproving look he received from the prime. The strategist went from an aggressive stance to cringing back under the force of the Prime’s field. Seems someone had finally had enough.

Megatron chuckled darkly.

The room cleared, if slowly, and Optimus pointedly strode over to close the door. Literally in a protesting Ironhide’s face. Only once he’d returned to where Megatron stood, did he speak again. “..Megatron..” His tone was vastly different. Heavy with concern. His one time friend had been so grossly altered.

Megatron motioned a warped hand dismissively, the fingers incredibly long, “Enough simpering. We don’t have time. Why didn’t you use the nanite formula I sent with Starscream?” There was that temper again, brewing. The mech’s teeth were starting to show as he bared them. They were long and dangerous looking.

This caught Optimus off guard. Many things began making sense in its light. “Because he refused to give it to us.” Was told honestly. “We managed to replicate them from what we physically removed from Starscream, but by then it was too late.”

The temper Megatron was known for had increased with his change and he exploded, “WHAT?!” Arms swept down and out, hands curling to claws. He loomed over the prime, field a heavy, prickly thing. “Why didn’t you take it?!”

Optimus weathered this, knowing it would pass. Or at least it always had in the past. It was one of the problems with fighting a civil war where the faction heads had once been lovers.. they knew one another fairly well.

Megatron dragged a hand over his elongated face when Optimus wouldn’t even flinch. The warlord knew why Optimus hadn’t taken it. He pulled back and slumped some. “I will kill him.” Neither

questioned why Starscream had done such a thing.

“Megatron.. What of your people? What is going on?” Optimus pleaded of the warlord.

Megatron steadied himself, then vented hard. “We are being invaded. If in a way.”

Optimus wasn’t too surprised. That hadn’t been too hard to figure out, even without knowing much. “..Megatron, please. I need details.”

The Decepticon rolled his optics, “Quintessons, prime. The Quintessons have returned. Only they don’t actually care if we survive. This is an experiment. They wish to terraform Cybertron to suite their desires. This is phase one.”

Phase one. Optimus’ optics went wide as he took in these possibilities. “Terraform to what exactly?”

“That we never had time to determine.” Megatron gave with a frustrated growl. “My whole faction is currently enslaved and under the control of the one Quintessson who’s made it planet side. I’m not even sure there will be others.”

Optimus reeled with this idea. Billions could be dead, were likely dead, for what? “Why?”

Megatron grunted, “You aren’t listening, Prime! This is an experiment! They don’t care how many are dead, or if it fails. This is merely a test to see if it works.. and it is working! The nanite cloud is recoding mechs. Changing them to beast forms. Most die. The change is too drastic, too painful, and of those that survive, many are driven insane.” He straightened as best he could, his own form warped. His sanity decidedly in question. “In Kaon the terraforming process is nearing completion. The nanites dismantle everything down to base components, then use the materials to rebuild. Kaon is unrecognizable. I don’t even know the words to describe what it is now.”

Optimus’ thoughts were broiling about in his helm. It was a bleak, heavy process. They couldn’t save all the mechs already caught up in this process. However, it being phase one, perhaps they could stop the whole cycle and save their world from being totally lost to them. “Megatron...” He hesitated after that.

Megatron eyed him, teeth slowly bared at the prime. The warlord said

nothing though, his field pulsing out heavy disgust. He expected Optimus to be weak now. The mech was surprised however.

“Stay with us. We will need you if we are to assault Kaon and free your Decepticons. If we are to stop this Quintesson.” Optimus almost couldn’t believe that detail. The Quintessons were a myth. A mere legend. The boogymech mentors told their mechlings about to try and scare them. Clearly the legends exaggerated claims that the Quintessons had been wiped out.

Hiding his surprise, Megatron loomed over the prime, staring into blue optics. There the two held for a long moment. Their love had long faded, neither having the interest in rekindling their romance, but they knew the situation was dire and that meant having to work with one another. “Very well.” Was given quietly, his engine rumbling deep in his chest.

Optimus could feel that through the floor and merely nodded. However, the mech had something to offer the warlord. “As we rebuild, we can finally change things for the better as we discussed so many times.”

Red optics narrowed, but Megatron merely growled, “I’ll hold you to that.”

Jazz found a familiar group of mechs gathered together in a corner of the fall back point. Most were sitting, some laying, no one really recharging. Smokescreen jumped to his peds though as Jazz appeared with the miserable looking Bluestreak. “Blue!” While Smokescreen was delighted to see Jazz too, the mechling took up his immediate thoughts. During the mechling’s months with them, Bluestreak had been most popular. He was sweet and easy to get along with.

Near instantly Bluestreak was in Smokescreen’s arms and sobbing. Smokescreen didn’t quite know what to do, but he wrapped Bluestreak in his arms and field soothed as best he could. “What happened?”

Others too stood to gather around and comfort the mechling. Gears turned to Jazz though, field welcoming Jazz back. “Thank Primus you’re here. What happened?”

Bumblebee asked, “Where’s Prowl?”

Jazz motioned his hands to ask for silence. “Prowl’s in medical.

Ratchet's workin' on him. I don't got no idea how that's gonna end." Which had unease passing through everyone. "Could you all keep an optic on Blue? I got things I gotta do."

Bluestreak straightened for that. "No! ..Jazz.."

Jazz turned to the mechling, and gripped the hand that reached for him. "Ain't leaving base, starshine. Promise. Ya rest with these mechs. Fuel if there's any.. I'll be back." While it was hard to leave Bluestreak, Jazz knew he was in good hands. He steeled his spark against the sob he heard as he left.

Chapter 14: Interlude

Chapter Summary

Downtime while repairs are made and mechs rest.

Chapter Notes

Got my second shot.. and boy was I miserable. Took two full days to recover.

Jazz found Ironhide standing outside of the same door that had been closed in his face. “Can’t letcha in, Jazz.” The red mech gave apologetically.

There was an easy smile from the saboteur. “Ain’t gonna ask that. Lookin’ for you. What’s been goin’ on, mech?”

Ironhide relaxed some, but then rubbed at the back of his helm. “Ain’t good. We lost a lotta mechs. The nanites are buildin’ those fragging white mechanimals. Any time we kill a bunch they get remade.” He paused to glance at the door. Things had been quiet for a bit and that was worrisome. It made Ironhide grimace, “Keep hopin’ we start actin’ instead of reactin’.”

Jazz nodding, understanding, and wishing that too. “We’ll manage, ‘Hide. I gotta go see Ratch. We ain’t gonna get no where if we lose Prowl.”

Ironhide couldn’t hide his dismay at that. He was one of the few who understood what the Praxian could offer. “Ping me if there’s need.”

Gripping Ironhide’s arm, Jazz smiled and took himself away. He was tired, and he was filthy, but there’d be no rest for him a while yet. Medical was quiet when he arrived, all the mechs in stasis, with only Ratchet working. Jazz wondered, for the first time, if any other medics had survived. That was a blow they couldn’t afford. Ratchet was standing at the head of the medical berth working on Prowl. There was an improvised sterilization field around the Praxian head, for the helm of the mech had been removed. Jazz hid his dismay at seeing the red chevron on the white helm resting near by on a table.

“Don’t even bother to ask.” Ratchet groused as he ever so carefully worked on Prowl’s processor. “I need a full medical suite and better

tools, never mind having some help, but here we are." He sounded bitter and tired.

Jazz understood the combination only too well, but refused to express it. Instead he smiled, "Can I help then?"

The medic paused to eye Jazz balefully. The saboteur was one of the few who could bare its weight and merely smiled all the more sweetly. It made Ratchet vent. "Fine.. get me the vice grips from over there on the table.."

The two worked for hours on Prowl. Long enough that Jazz started to get hazy during the procedure. Ratchet ordered him to a cot and the Polyhexian didn't argue. He woke hours later to Hound touching his hand lightly. Field brushing. Jazz woke still and dangerous, but Hound held still to let the mech finish waking. When the white frame relaxed, Hound offered the mech a small energon cube. "Optimus wants to talk to you." The scout whispered. Across the way Prowl was wearing his helm once more, but was still in stasis. The bulk of Ratchet was on another cot, facing the wall and clearly in recharge.

Jazz nodded, accepting the cube. As Hound pulled back, he sat himself up, touching fields in gratitude for both wake up and fuel. A cube that was downed in one long swallow. He dispersed the cube and was helped to his peds. "Mirage okay?"

Hound nodded, smiling, "He's fine. Recharging. We got back late from scouting."

Feeling relief for his best friend, Jazz nodded. "Ya rest too?" Asked as he went to the medical berth to grip Prowl's unresponsive fingers before leaving so that they wouldn't wake Ratchet.

Hound fell into step with his commander, "A few hours, yes. As much as can be expected considering."

As they walked through the maintenance area, Jazz saw mechs everywhere. Recharging, or sitting. There was an uncomfortable tension about the place. Nearing the prime's room, Jazz looked to his friend, "Go check on Blue for me? Once Ratch's awake, let the mechling see Prowl?"

Hound nodded firmly, and gave a smile. "Be careful in there, Jazz." Meaning with the prime.

Jazz grinned his lopsided grin and claimed, "Always am."

Ironhide let him in and Jazz found the Prime going over some datapads on a makeshift table. He even sat on a crate, which couldn't have been all that comfortable. Against a wall, on some thermals, Megatron lay on his side, recharging. The big mech was so tired he hadn't so much as twitched in hours.

Moving over to the table, Jazz touched fields with his oldest friend. "Ya recharge?"

Optimus nodded, "I have. Thank you." Considering how his field was responding, it seemed the prime actually had rested. Placing his datapad down, the mech glanced to Megatron, then returned his attention to Jazz. "He says this is an assault by Quintessons. That they are attempting to terraform Cybertron. None of us know why. However, the Quintesson in question is in Kaon. We must put this to a stop. What is Prowl's condition?"

While he didn't know about the terraforming, it wasn't much of a surprise. Jazz frowned and considered his words. "Won't know about Prowler until Ratch wakes. The surgery is done an' Prowler's still alive, but that's all I got. This ain't much of an assault team, Prime."

Optimus looked down and nodded, "I know, but we must try. Once word on Prowl has been given, we will gather and travel to Kaon. Unfortunately we must go by wheel. I have no details I am willing to share until after I can speak with Prowl."

Jazz looked to Megatron pointedly, "An'…?"

Optimus didn't look back, "He has agreed to work with us." There was a pause as the prime rubbed at his optics. To think he'd believed the war was the hardest thing he would ever have to deal with. "Megatron sent Starscream to us with protective nanites and the Quintesson information. If Starscream had not.. well, been Starscream, we would be in a better position now. I believe Megatron wants this stopped as much as we do. The Decepticons are captives now. Changed as Megatron is."

While Jazz had doubts, knowing Megatron had made brief alliances before only to betray the Autobots, he couldn't deny that they needed Megatron's strength and combat skills. "Don't let him break yer spark, Prime."

Optimus regarded him wearily, "It is far, far too late for that warning,

my friend.”

Prowl booted and found his thoughts clear. The crash haze was gone and everything seemed in order. Before he onlined his optics, he went over memory, taking in what others had said around him while he was offline. Seems there was little of relevance to go over. However, Bluestreak was here and clearly miserable so that needed dealing with.

Shifting, the enforcer reached over to touch Bluestreak’s pauldron. “Bluestreak.” He gave quietly, a whisper, turning his helm to the young mech.

Bluestreak sat up bolt right, his optics huge. “Prowl!” was exclaimed as he threw himself over the older Praxian and clung.

Then Ratchet was there, his touch gentle as he tried to separate the two. “Easy, sweet spark.” Given as he tugged Bluestreak up. “Give him a moment.” While Bluestreak clearly didn’t want to, he let go of Prowl and did as the medic asked.

Once Prowl was seated, his peds dangling off the berth, and Ratchet’s checks done, Bluestreak was allowed back in Prowl’s arms. “I told you I wouldn’t leave you.” Prowl murmured there, his field once again able to express itself. Bluestreak hid his face against Prowl’s hood and just clung to the older mech. Prowl vented softly and rubbed between the mechlings doorwings. Nothing was said for a time as the two comforted one another.

Not that Ratchet was done yet. “We need to make adjustments once we can find a proper medical facility. Don’t do that again.” Given firmly. “You do and I won’t be able to fix it.”

Prowl knew the warning was real, but made no promises, “Acknowledged.”

Ratchet gave him his most disapproving look, but the enforcer wasn’t swayed.

Starscream hadn’t been left behind when the Autobots fled their base, but that didn’t mean they’d been foolish about it. Nor all that kind. There were some mechs upset at having to lug the unconscious flier

around, but it needed doing.

Megatron watched as a medic jacked into the seeker using a datapad to wake him up. The warlord was angry over Starscream's treatment, and glowered at the medic. Who mostly ignored him. The two knew one another from well before the war, and their animosity was mutual.

Ratchet straightened, "Good luck." He told the warlord as he left. The medic wasn't stupid enough to be in arms reach of the seeker once he woke. Outside the makeshift cell, the door closed, Ironhide folded his arms across his hood and settled in for the show. The door might not be open, but he was sure he'd get an audial full.

Nor was he wrong. Starscream came online slowly to finding himself uncomfortable. They'd placed him on a bare floor that was both cold and hard. One of his wings was pinched. "Idiots! Couldn't you even lay me down some where suitable! I..."

Trailing off he realized there was someone close. Someone very large, with dark red optics and a deep engine rumble, that was looking down at him. Starscream shrieked as he scrambled gracelessly away. Unable to get far due to the small room, and Megatron's huge hand gripping around his knee, the seeker threw up his arms to protect his helm. "Don't eat me! I don't taste good!"

Wry, Megatron gave, "It's lovely to see you as well, Starscream."

Starscream's optics were huge as he stared at the other from behind his arms. Arms that slowly lowered as fields touched and the truth was revealed there. "..Megatron?" While this was obvious, he ignored that and scrambled to his knees to lay his hands on the warped chest of the warlord. "Were you captured? What happened? You're hideous!" There was a pause as the seeker grimaced, "Worse than normal."

Megatron's optics narrowed and his field gave warning, but Starscream continued with, "At least that horrible nose is gone."

Megatron gripped Starscream's wrists and pull them away as his engine growled. "Enough." With that grip he gave the seeker a good shake and received protests for it. "What have you done!? Why did you not give the Autobots the nanites as we agreed?!"

"Stop! Stop!" Starscream, a bit rattled by the rough treatment, tried to pull free and failed. "You are hurting me!"

“I’ll do worse! Why?!”

Starscream gave angrily, “They are arrogant afts who treated me badly! They didn’t deserve the nanites we worked so hard on!”

Megatron’s optics brightened in an ominous manner, “The Decepticons are gone, you fool!” He gave Starscream another shake. “We needed them to have the nanites so they could perfect them! You’ve cost us everything!” His voice rose until he was bellowing at the cringing seeker trapped in his grip.

Ratchet frowned up at Megatron, wondering why he couldn’t have died with the other medics and thus have been spared this mess.

“You are sure this will work?” Megatron asked, his engine rumbling low, glowering back. Neither was all that impressed with the other, nor intimidated.

“Frag no.” Ratchet shrugged a pauldron on one side, “But I know what’s wrong. I’ve seen it before. Albeit not due to insane nanites and invasions.” He sounded sour and felt that too. “The nanites protecting you obviously failed, but not entirely so.” The medic paused then motioned his hands to echo his words. “These nanites highjack our transformation cog, and quite literally input a new alt mode. The problem is, nothing was done to cushion the rest of the system against the drastic differences between old and new alt mode. This is why so many are dying. Why forms are so warped. If I can get inside and clean up the corrupted code, then reboot the transformation cog, as well as it’s systems, we might be able to get you to what the nanites truly intended – Not this half state.”

Megatron considered, taking his time to do so. “You’ve seen this before?” Was the question he picked in the end.

In the small medical area, now cleared of other mechs, Ratchet hadn’t expected that to be the one asked. However, the medic nodded, “It’s rare, but sometimes our transformation sequences fail. Especially if a mech has never changed alt modes before. This leaves the mech with an extremely painful physical malformation. A limb often, but I’ve read about the whole frame being effected. I’ve seen it twice, each time in mechlings, but never this bad. Reboot the transformation system, and things right themselves out. You.. you’re going to need

more than that, but I think this is the basis for what needs done."

There was more thinking about this. "But you can't return me to what I once was." Megatron asked rhetorically.

Ratchet nodded, "I'm sorry, but no. Your alt mode has already been over written and your frame drastically changed. There's no medic on Cybertron that knows how to undo that. Frag, we couldn't have done this to begin with. Using a transformation system to alter the frame on a fundamental level is beyond everything I know."

Megatron sank down into a crouch because it was easier on his back. His large wings could then rest on the floor and be supported. "Then I do believe you should get to work. This sounds like it will take a while."

Ratchet smirked at the Decepticon. Megatron was laid down on the floor, on a thermal, and put into stasis. Ratchet could tell the mech was apprehensive, but he went through it anyway. All in all it took Ratchet much of the night to repair the damaged code and make corrections.

Optimus found him in the wee hours, approaching quietly. "How is he?" The young prime was so conflicted by Megatron, but he knew his own spark and what he felt he had to do to save Cybertron.

Looking up, the medic was weary, "Almost done. Another few minutes."

Optimus gently placed a hand on Ratchet's pauldron and gripped there. "Ratchet, you should rest. It is very late."

Shaking his helm in a firm no, Ratchet said, "Literally.. almost done."

Waiting it out, Optimus was surprised when it really was done not quite a minute later. Ratchet vented heavily. "I'm going to trigger his transformation sequence."

This was done with a simple code push, and Ratchet removed his jack before backing away. Optimus caught him as he stumbled in his weariness, and the pair remained close as they watched. With a very familiar transforming sound, Megatron's warped frame changed. Having left the mech in stasis, Ratchet had ensured Megatron would feel no pain.

The twisted form straightened out. The hints of his old, gray frame

disappeared in black scales that turned glossy. The dark spread all over and then faded in areas. Silver became an accent hue for the mech, along with touches of red.

The awkward wings disappeared, pulled into subspace, and Megatron's spine straightened. The hunch disappeared. Kibble rearranged itself to release pinched joints. All in all the one time miner's appearance was much improved.

Optimus breathed, "He is magnificent now." And Megatron was. The elongated face had been returned to a more proper arrangement of features. Complete with the nose Starscream had so recently called ugly. Megatron looks like Megatron again. Albeit with curving horns that curled back from his face, and some sharp kibble.

"Don't let him hear that. He's enough of aft as it is." Ratchet moved over and knelt near the Decepticon, checking on him. "Everything is stable." He didn't wait for permission to wake the mech up.

Megatron booted and groaned at the ache that remained. He didn't lash out, and instead laid still some moments before slowly sitting himself up. The one time timer was surprised to find the pain was mostly gone. There was only that ache. There, on the floor, he looked himself over. Limbs properly proportioned, hands their normal size.. he was no longer the warped thing he'd been for so many months. "This can be done for others?"

Ratchet nodded as Optimus offered Megatron a hand up. "Physically, yes. I'm not sure how viable it'll be.."

Megatron bared his teeth and moved over to loom over the medic, "You won't help them?"

Optimus touched Megatron's arm, halting the loom some, "Megatron, enough. That is not how Ratchet behaves." He was glared at for intervening.

"Stop being an aft." Ratchet put his hands on his hip flare, and vented heavily. "It's not a matter of repeating what was done to you. Many mechs have been driven past their tolerances. Their minds are shattered. Resetting a transformation system won't repair that. We need to take things on a case by case basis, and frankly we may have to wait until after this whole situation is resolved before we can do anything at all. Many of the mechs might have to be reset, and that's never a happy process."

Megatron's plating flared as he vented his agitation, but he wasn't familiar with a process Ratchet had just mentioned. "What do you mean by reset?" For Ratchet had said that the transformation system needed to be reset, but this other process held far more reservation and weight.

It was Optimus who answered, "When a mech can be saved, but not the memories, or the processor. They call this being reset. Repairs are made, the mech is woken, and is more or less a mechling again."

Megatron was silent for a long period after, realizing he may have truly lost his Decepticons for good.

Chapter 15: Road Trip

Chapter Summary

> The Autobots decide to put a stop to this whole affair, one way or another.

Chapter Notes

> Thank you, yet again, for the wonderful comments! You all make my day with each one. :) With that, if you have questions about things, feel free to ask.

Prowl arrived in Optimus' room without any fanfare. There were guards at the door, but they merely gave the Praxian nods, and allowed him inside. Optimus was sitting wearily at a table as Megatron paced the back of the small room. Made seemingly all the smaller for his large size. Prowl's wings lifted in surprise at the change in the warlord's appearance. While heavily altered, Megatron was a mech again. Seems word of Ratchet working another miracle was true.

"You called for me, sir?" Prowl asked as he came to stand at the makeshift table. It was covered in datapads and other things.

Optimus nodded and motioned to a chair across from him. "Thank you, Prowl. I require your unique assets in way of coming up with our next step. We must assault the Quitesson, and put a stop to this, but we have no idea as to how best do that.

Megatron stopped pacing to watch the goings on.

Prowl sat carefully on the edge of the chair, wings flickering. After a moment he intoned, "Not enough data." Like that would explain everything.

Optimus hesitated for that. "Excuse me?" While the prime had heard that phrase before, he had prayed not to hear it now.

After a glance to the looming Megatron, Prowl's wings shifted lower. "My apologies, sir, but I do not have enough data. Yes, I have gone over what was brought by Starscream, and by Megatron. Even with that, there isn't anything I can accurately base speculation on. The only way to gain such information is to go to where the Quintesson is. There are too many variables."

Megatron snorted, “You want to assault the Quintesson?”

Wings shrugged for the mech, “What other choice is there? It will be dangerous, yes. It could cost us everything, yes. However, this is all we have. Cybertron may already be long past saving. Right now we must fight to save ourselves, and that entails finding this Quintesson and stopping it. Only after that will we be able to learn if the nanites can fully be stopped.”

Optimus shifted in his chair to look back at Megatron. “I fear he is right. Will you join with us to stop this ..thing?”

Megatron growled in frustration and folded his arms. “What choice is there?” Feeling he were just echoing the Praxian.

Optimus looked down. “I fear none. Especially since we have no choice but to go by road. We will have to make arrangements for those who have no wheels.” He vented quietly, rubbing at his optics. “Prowl, would you gather my generals for me, then organize everyone willing to go. This is to be volunteer only. See to our supplies.”

Prowl’s spark was low, knowing what danger everyone would be driving into, but he merely nodded firmly and rose to go.

Megatron waited for the mech to leave the room before he rumbled, “This will be the death of us.”

Optimus looked over. “We face certain death either way, my friend.”

“This is madness!” Bluster shouted after the idea of seeking out the Quintesson was explained.

In the back of the room Megatron laughed a sharp and chilling sound. It brought everything to a halt ,and silence reigned some moments before Optimus replied. “Yes, and it is all we can do.”

Bluster and his fellow generals shifted in discomfort. “No.. it can’t be! The scientists… they found the nanites and reverse engineered them. This can happen again!”

“With what equipment?” Optimus asked quietly, but with no gentleness. The mech so known for being kind was at the end of his saintly patience. Behind him Ratchet folded his arms over his hood, and Megatron loomed. Ironhide too was near by, another silent

supporter of the prime.

The generals glanced to one another. “We can find equipment.” Flack insisted. He spread his hands as if pleading.

Ratchet snorted at him, “Where? We’ve been trying to find equipment since this started, mech. The nanites have destroyed everything. Even this place is being eaten away.” He motioned a red hand at the very room itself. Indeed, there were wisps of smoke everywhere. It clung to plating, tinging mechs gray.

Optimus shock his helm. “Please.” Asking for the arguing to stop, which it actually did. “I am going. Ironhide, Prowl has been gathering volunteers. Go see if they would speak with me.” Ironhide nodded and brushed roughly past the generals.

“Optimus, I beg you.. don’t do this.” Bluster pleaded with the prime. “This is insanity. We can find a way. There are many sublevels we can retreat to. Equipment must be available somewhere. We have stories of caches. Our spec ops team will know of places besides this one.” The other generals added their voices, but they fell on deaf audials.

Optimus stood, looking down on them with pity. Since the war these mechs had argued against every change, every benefit to those who were not the old command. It was as if all the arguments Ratchet and Jazz had given him about them suddenly clicked into place to make complete sense. These mechs had been lengthening the war. Making it far more dangerous and longer than it ever had to be. They didn’t want Cybertron to change for the better. Shuttering his optics a moment, Optimus then asked, “So you are not going with me?”

That stopped the generals cold. No one spoke for a long moment. Not until Ratchet scoffed at them.

Bluster then shook his head. “No.” The other generals echoed their agreement.

Optimus nodded, “So be it.” He turned to those with him and says, “Let us go.”

The gathering wasn’t large, but then there weren’t a whole lot of mechs left so that it could be large. Optimus stood before them all. He was grateful to see everyone but the generals, and associated cronies, were there. The whole of the survivors had chosen their prime. “My

friends, thank you for hearing me. You all know our dire situation. Unfortunately, it only grows worse. With our lack of supplies and available resources, we are faced with two options. Go deeper and let Cybertron be destroyed, or find the source and put a stop to it. Going deeper buys us time, if, and that is a dire if, we can find supplies, and it would mean abandoning Cybertron. I choose not to pursue that option. I am going to confront this threat and seek an end to it. With this in mind I ask for volunteers to face this with me. Will any of you go?"

It was a balm to his spark that no one left and everyone agreed. While the gathering was grim, everyone volunteered. Only Prowl had issue, and it wasn't for himself. "What of Bluestreak. He is but a mechling.."

Bluestreak burst out with, "No! I'm not staying behind! I'm not leaving you! I'm going with! I.."

Jazz shushed the mechling gently, "Prowler, he ain't got no where else ta be." The Polyhexian knew the risks, but he sided with the mechling anyway.

Prowl's wings lifted in an aggressive manner, "We will be driving directly into great danger." His voice was strangely soft even though he was clearly angry at this. Like angering Prowl made him lose emotion, not gain it.

Bluestreak clung to Prowl's arm. "No. Don't leave me with those mechs. Don't leave me." The mechling pleaded.

Those wings lowered for the pleading, as Prowl was hardly the icy spark so many labeled him. Jazz nodded and touched Prowl's other arm. "We'll keep him safe, ah promise."

Prowl looked to Bluestreak and his spark sank. Yet he still nodded, able to calculate this was a battle he simply couldn't win. How do you fight this against the two you love most in the world?

Optimus lifted his hands for silence as most the rest of the mechs had begun whispering among themselves. "Then we waste no time. Gather what you can. This trip will be long and difficult, so please.. if you have a wheeled alt mode, carry one who does not." As his thoughts went to the fact he would have to carry Megatron and Starscream, he looked to where the pair stood in a corner. The last of the Decepticons. Megatron was actually holding Starscream. Gently rubbing large hands up and down the smaller mech's arms. The seeker was angry, but allowed himself to be held. This plan didn't suite the

flier at all.

The gathering was solemn as mechs nodded and moved away to prepare. The generals attempted to talk specific mechs into staying, such as Ratchet, but the medic barked a laugh in their faces as he packed medical supplies. While two mechs changed their minds and went with the smaller group, no one else did.

Before long Megatron took it upon himself to harass the generals. Following them around, and growling at them when they attempted to speak to others. When Optimus declined to stop the warlord, those mechs slipped away and troubled no one further.

Subspaces were packed with all they could carry, and the large group moved to the surface. Those that could carry others did, and the large convoy was underway. Moving through the eerily quiet streets, the nanite fog wafting and waning, Prowl made sure to keep Bluestreak close. The mechling was between him and Jazz, the three traveling as a unit within the greater mass. They stayed near Optimus, Ironhide, and Ratchet, even though they could easily out pace the trio.

On the back of Optimus, Megatron and Starscream sat, Starscream in Megatron's lap more or less for lack of room. Both could fly, but the wheeled mechs traveled to slowly for that.

This isn't to say the trip was easy. The roads were in horrible shape, and sharkticons wandered the streets. However, once the gathering had left the city, traveling became easier. While the roads were in no better condition, attacks diminished to almost none.

Wheeljack pulled up on Ratchet a few days later, the roads feeling endless. "The cloud is thinning." Unfortunately that meant everyone could see how bad things were. No buildings remained anywhere as they traveled to Kaon. "You think it could be an expanding ring and we might move out of it?"

Ratchet grunted, more focused on avoiding the pitfalls of the road. The pavement was badly eaten away and progress was slowing. "That doesn't really help us any, Wheeljack. That just means we'll be seen before we want to be."

There was a pause about that. "..Yeah, that would be bad, wouldn't it?" Wheeljack hadn't thought about that.

From Wheeljack's passenger seat, Perceptor added, "From one danger to another."

Another few days later word was passed out that there was trouble and the whole gathering stopped. An Autobot had nearly crashed when something seized up internally. He was brought forward and Ratchet went back to see what was wrong. Everyone else slumped down to rest as best they could.

Prowl sat leaning against Jazz, and they both held Bluestreak. Traveling like this was hard on all. Prowl had been leaning on Jazz in more ways than physically, but the Polyhexian never faltered. He was always upbeat and kind. Often improving the moral of the whole group when they stopped for rests. Now was no exception as the saboteur began to sing. His raspy voice was warm and comforting as he sang an old love song. The mech had a true knack for the emotional.

Their fields meshed in a comfortable manner that allowed Bluestreak to recharge.

Prowl's wings swayed in time with the song, completely unaware he was doing so. He too was drifting off when Ratchet returned to Optimus.

"We have a problem." Ratchet gave without preamble.

Optimus rose to his peds as everyone began to pay attention to the pair. "Tell me."

Ratchet put his hands on his hip flare and vented. "The effectiveness of the nanites is wearing off. We've a mech changing. There are going to be others."

There was a horror that rippled out from this statement, but only Optimus spoke. "Can nothing be done?"

Ratchet looked away, as sure sign he didn't think there was much, yet he said, "I can do for him what I did for Megatron, but I can't stop the process. Only make it survivable. For now he'll have to be carried with the others."

Optimus nodded slowly, pauldrons slumping some. "Very well. We shall force the change when that becomes necessary. For now we try for more distance."

It was only a few hours later when the group literally ran out of road. The nanite cloud had consumed it entirely. There was nearly a pileup as mechs screeched to a halt all down the line, fields sharing relief when no one crashed.

All transformed up, passengers hopping out and doing the same. They moved forward to see for themselves what was going on. Megatron looked out at the gray tinged expanse of bare stone and metal a time along with all the others. He rumbled in displeasure. “I suppose from here we walk.”

Starscream’s voice pitched painfully as he protested, “I can’t walk all that way!”

Megatron grunted at him and turned away, “Then stay.”

Thinking their relationship was decidedly an odd one, Optimus nodded, and looked back to the gathering. “We camp for the night.” Not that anyone could tell what time of day it was by the lifeless gray surrounding them, but chronometers still functioned.

Ratchet, as tired as everyone else, still went back to help that one mech while there was time. Ironhide went with him.

Megatron rumbled low as he stood near Optimus, watching the medic walk away. “He expects this to happen to all.” Meaning Ratchet.

Optimus nodded slowly, quiet a few seconds more. “Better a controlled change than driven insane and suffering.” He looked to Megatron after that, “Cybertron will never be the same after this, but better we use the chance to rebuild.”

Megatron scoffed, expecting that to mean back to what it was, yet Optimus surprised him., “Will you aid me, Megatron? We could create the Cybertron we dreamed of all those years ago.”

“And what of your little pack of generals, Prime?”

Optimus looked at his weary gathering of mechs. “They made their choice. I have made mine.”

Hearing the steel in that quiet tone, and remembering how stubborn Orion could be once he’d made up his mind, Megatron tilted his helm in a curious manner. “We can talk more on that once the Quintesson is dead.”

Since it was all the assurance he was going to get, Optimus nodded. “So be it.” Off, not so far away, a mech screamed in pain as his transformation to a new form began. Optimus shuttered his optics.

Chapter 16: Changes

Chapter Summary

The protections against the nanites begin to fail.

Day by day more mechs were forced to change. Ratchet dropped as many into stasis that were willing, but the rare mech demanded to be conscious. Their screams were hardly comfortable.

When Bluestreak noticed a corruption in Jazz's plating, the saboteur knew it was his turn for forced change. Prowl's wings hung low as the Polyhexian moved to speak to Ratchet. Prowl and Bluestreak held hands as they walked, and now they turned to follow Jazz. Bluestreak's wings were twitching in fear, as he knew what this meant, and sadly Prowl found he had no assurances. This meant the end of Jazz's racing days. The mech was so proud of his frame. Perhaps vain, but Prowl still mourned for his friend.

The group as a whole tried to keep together, but there were always stragglers. Walking this far, for this long, was alien to everyone. Sadly the lack of roads meant few could continue on wheels. So it was decided all would walk. No one was allowed to drop too far back however. Not that the Praxians and their companion strayed as such. It was an easy hop to reach the medic who trudged along side his twin. Ratchet frowned as he looked over. "Frag, not you too?"

Jazz beamed his lopsided smile and said in a cheerful manner, "'Fraid so, docbot."

The medic looked pained as he vented. "Alright. Once we've stopped for the night." Ratchet paused a moment and then groused, "Please tell me you'll have sense and let me knock you out."

Jazz lifted his hands in surrender. "Ah ain't that stupid. Knock me out."

Ratchet grunted and nodded, turning his attention to where he put his peds. The ground was uneven, even if it was barren. The nanites had stripped everything to the bedrock and bulk metal.

Bluestreak reached out for Jazz's hand and gripped it. The trio walked on in silence thus connected, but at least together. It was difficult to tell where they were due to the dull gray everything, including the

sky, was. The nanite cloud blocked everything.

When they stopped for the night, mechs exhausted and energon running low, Ratchet sought out the trio. “You ready?”

Jazz chuckled, smile pulling to the side, “No, but what choice do ah have?”

Ratchet nodded and motioned, “Lay down then.” He withdrew a datapad from subspace. The datapad was showing signs of nanite consumption.

Perceptor limped over, followed by Wheeljack, and the two lent what aid they could so that they could learn what to do as well. It was only a matter of time for all them, and someone had to help Ratchet.

Bluestreak clung to Jazz’s hand. “Will it hurt?” He asked in a rush, optics wide, wings expressing their fear.

Jazz turned to the mechling and petted his cheekguards. “Don’t ya be afraid, starshine. Ratchet won’t let it hurt none.”

“You promise?” Bluestreak whispered.

Ratchet replied, “I promise.”

It was all Bluestreak was going to get, so he nodded and let Jazz’s hand go. Prowl slid an arm around the young mech to comfort them both.

Jazz laid himself down on the ground, and Perceptor jacked in. With Ratchet monitoring, the scientist first put Jazz into stasis. Once the Polyhexian had gone still, Perceptor then located the proper area of code and triggered the change in alt mode.

It never got easier to watch. Jazz’s frame twisted and morphed, even changing colors. While it wasn’t a complete color change, his dark accent grays became the dominant hue with white, red, and blue as accents. The bulky hood pulled to create a more sleek look and his biolights changed completely as well. The racer lost his wheels and became something with curious, pointed ears where his horns once were. Perceptor touched one, wondering, “He is the tenth with this configuration.”

Ratchet nods, “We all seem to be of a type. The fliers are another.” He didn’t glance to where Megatron and Starscream ignored the goings

on. “All of us with ground alt modes are becoming feline.” Reaching over he tapped the pad, “How are his vitals?”

Perceptor looked back down, using a fingertip to work controls. “Stable? Everything seems to be in alignment. We are improving.”

Wheeljack gave ruefully, “Excuse me if I don’t celebrate.”

Agreeing, but not saying so Ratchet vented roughly. “Let’s wake him up.”

Before anyone could, Prowl asked, “Could we be changed as well? Or do we need to wait for the first signs?” The Praxian sounded as calm as if he were asking of the weather.

The scientists glanced between one another, and as the hesitation grew, it was Ratchet who answered. “We can try. Are you sure?”

Prowl nodded firmly, “Absolutely. We should change everyone before the inevitable occurs. It is only a matter of when we are attacked by the white mechanimals.”

None of them wanted to do this, for they all hoped that some mechs wouldn’t change. That hope didn’t stop them from nodding to one another and motioning Prowl to lay down.

Bluestreak’s wings rose in alarm. “What? No.. Prowl..”

The Praxian turned to the mechling that was now his to care for. “We must.”

“But Jazz hasn’t woken up! What if that happens to you!”

“Bluestreak, Jazz is fine.” Prowl assured.

Perceptor blushed and apologized, “Forgive me! It will only take a moment..” And with that he woke the Polyhexian.

Bluestreak calmed a good deal as he knelt to hug on the somewhat dazed saboteur. “Are you okay?! Did it hurt?”

Jazz wrapped an arm around Bluestreak as he tried to sit up. Prowl helped him do so. “Ahm good, starshine. Promise, promise. Ache a little is all.”

With Jazz having returned to himself, Prowl laid himself down. Jazz briefly looked alarmed before he schooled his features. “Mech..”

Prowl shook his helm. “We must.” With that he put himself into stasis.

Perceptor blinked at that, not having jacked in. “….?”

Ratchet chuckled, “He does that. Make the changes.” Then the medic turned to Bluestreak. “Shall we change you too?”

Bluestreak hesitated only a moment before he nodded. “Yes.”

“Then lay down, sweetspark. This won’t take long.” Putting the mechling into stasis, Ratchet triggered his alt mode shift as well, and both Praxian’s transformed. While Prowl kept his colors, Bluestreak shifted to more dark gray like Jazz had. Otherwise they kept their distinguishing kibble as they became beastmechs.

Jazz was secretly terrified it would go wrong. It had with one mech. Ratchet had saved him in the end, but it had been close. That mech would need replacement parts, but for now could carry on. This time however, their changes went without issue. Even so it felt a long, terrifying wait.

Only there was one notable change. As Prowl sat up, and found himself in Jazz’s arms, he reached out with fields to share his pleasure in that. Only Jazz found the mech rather loud in his doing so. “Woah! Mech..”

Prowl went still, and as he still had wings, they went low. “What is wrong?” Those wings were changed now. There was a top ridge of metal, and the wings were now almost bat-like with finger lengths and mesh in between. The mesh was a blue hexagon in appearance, glowing faintly. Like a strange biolight.

Jazz found him self smiling. Delighting in that something good had come out of all this. “Yer shouting at me, mech. That change fixed yer spark setting issue.”

That sure got Ratchet’s attention, and the medic dropped to one knee near the pair. Perceptor was even then waking Bluestreak up. “May I?” Ratchet asked of Prowl.

When given permission to touch, Ratchet ran his hands over Prowl’s torso, focusing in on some areas. He even appeared to be listening. Prowl’s wings lifted, “That is decidedly strange.” For the Praxian could tell the medic was doing more than scanning.

Ratchet’s optics widened. “Frag me.. it corrected the issue in full.”

Clearly amazed at that. Then he grinned briefly, relieved for some good news, “Welcome to learning how to use your field again.”

Prowl frowned, not liking that at all! His ears shifting back for it. And liking it a great deal at the same time. His wings drooped and then twitched, uncertain where to be. Yet he found himself distracted as he swatted at Jazz for fondling his newly made ears. Those shifted back again. “Stop that.”

Jazz grinned as he tried once more, “But they are so cute!”

Prowl frowned and his wings llifted to an aggressive stance, “No.” The no was something Jazz honored, but he still grinned at the Praxian, enjoying the chance to tease.

Both then were distracted by Bluestreak waking. The mechling whined some as his frame ached terribly. The adults quickly comforted him though, and his ears flickered along with his wings. He was one of the first to transform to alt mode as well. Wanting to see what he was, the mechling shifted into a dark gray cybercat with red markings. There was a long stripe of blue bio-lights down each of his sides. While finding it decidedly strange, he took to the change with the normal mechling buoyancy, and was soon babbling about how cool it was.

During this, mechs watching the distraction, Optimus approached Ratchet. “Prowl does have a point.” He murmured to the medic. “We all should force change.”

Ratchet’s field flared, but then he didn’t say anything. “...” No, he didn’t like this idea at all, yet.. he could see the logic in it. Frown pulling into place, his emotional shift brought Ironhide to see what was going on. Optimus nodded to the warrior, but waited for Ratchet to reply.

Rubbing at his face with a hand, Ratchet slowly nodded, “Only if it’s volunteer.”

Optimus lowered his face a moment, but then nodded. “Very well. I shall go first.”

Ironhide blanched for that, “Prime.. no.” He tried to keep his voice down, but mechs were already noticing something was going on.

“Ironhide, better now, and as under control as we can manage.” Optimus motioned a hand to express his conviction in the idea, and Ironhide looked stricken. The changing of the prime brought most

everyone to watch. Even Megatron showed interest and loomed over the others to watch his rival change. Starscream feigned disinterest, and removed himself a small distance.

The change went well, for all Optimus wasn't entirely like the others. He clearly had a mane, for all he was feline. Megatron snorted for it, but said nothing as he left.

With Optimus changed, some of the others allowed themselves to be changed as well. Not all, but most. Not all changes went smoothly, but for the most part everyone turned out alright. Even Ratchet let himself be changed, Ironhide following soon after, and the medic rubbed at his own ears in the aftermath, boggling at them.

They stayed at that location through the night, many shifting to alt mode as word passed around it was easier to recharge in. Prowl, Jazz, and Bluestreak clumped together for comfort, and managed some rest. No one was feeling well the next day, frames sore, but the group moved on regardless. Only this time many were in alt mode, finding it easier to travel over the rough terrain.

Chapter 17: Trouble

Optimus was feeling most low as he put one paw in front of him, one after the other. It had been days of walking through the heavy nanite mists, and over rough terrain. The nanites had stripped the ground down to barren rock and the natural metals of Cybertron. It left passage difficult at best. Behind him the rest of the Autobots straggled out behind. Most were changed now, and those two who's resisted were nearly to the point they had to give in. Their frames bubbling and altering in spots.

If one was a ground mode one was a feline. A cybercat of some kind. But unlike the mechanimal, a smaller predator that was nearly extinct, the mechs comparable to their normal size. All had kept their previous colors. Optimus however, and likely because he was prime, had a layered mane of plates. Looking very lion while others looked like Tigers, or leopards. Some smaller mechs appeared as cougars.

The fliers were all dragons. Large, and with long wings, they often walked along side the felines due to easily outpacing the ground mechs, and no one could hover. Starscream, now changed, complained often and loudly at the start, but had fallen into quiet seething the last few days – simply too lose on energon to be able to grouse.

No one spoke much due to that low energon. All felt as though they would stop functioning here in this mess and be consumed by the nanites. There was little hope through the ranks as the landscape was never changing. Dull, gray fog so thick you couldn't see more than a few feet, and rough terrain. This trip weighed heavily on their sparks. The change most especially.

Finally Hound lifted his head, ears perking, looking with interest around. "I smell energon." He said.

Mirage, having stayed near his partner, managed a, "What? Where?"

While others lifted their heads to sniff, no one had Hound's olfactory sense. "This way." The green mech said, pausing before setting off a slightly different way. Having no other better direction to go, the rest of the group, even Megatron and Starscream, followed. Although, Starscream did complain until Megatron shushed him.

For long minutes, long enough to make mechs guess him insane, they

walked following Hound. But then the scout mech stumbled and grimaced. He'd come out of the fog between one step and the next, to find himself fully in Cybertron's weak sunlight. Even so, after months in the gloom, the light stabbed at his optics. "Ah.." He gave, ducking his helm. "Watch out, it's bright."

Others stumbled into the light as well, stopping and blinking owlishly. Mechs bumped into one another for it, and many transformed. Their voices lifted in amazement. Light!

Prowl too transformed, and once his optics had adjusted, he found himself looking at something so alien he had no words. Never having been off world, not having seen alien spaces, he didn't know what it was. Standing there, with a hand shading his optics, he gaped at what lay before him.

Only Ironhide knew what they were looking at. He transformed, a slow process for his energon was at dire levels, and then exclaimed, "A jungle? On Cybertron?"

For that's what lay before them all. In a crater lay a thick jungle of greens and blues. Huge trees reached up to spread tremendous canopies of leaves, their trunks glistening with biolights. And beneath those trees were other plans, huge bushes, tiny clumps of mushrooms… all illuminated in some manner. For the forest was techno-organic, a combination never seen on Cybertron before.

Standing at the rim of the miles wide crater, mechs gaped. Most had never been off world to see organics before.

But Hound didn't much care about the names of things. He took himself to what seemed a tiny tree, if compared to the others. The thing was slender, and it's branches bowed under the weight of many glowing fruits. Hound's nose had not failed him. Reaching up, the mech took down a fruit and brought it to his face. In spite of everything he smiled, "Energon. Strong energon too. No contaminants."

Ratchet limped over, in as poor shape as everyone else. He too took one. Sadly his portable scanner had been consumed by nanites in weeks past, but his hands held a medic's limited scanner, so he checked the fruit out in his manner as well. "Hound's right.. it's energon. Everyone be careful. No gorging. It's strong enough to get us overcharged easily."

Of course many ignored him, starving as they were. Prowl, Jazz, and

Bluestreak shared a fruit. Jazz had produced a blade that had somehow survived everything and separated the fruit evenly into threes. Then he tested the taste with a flick of his tongue. The mech's whole expression brightened, "Woah! Ya gotta try."

Bluestreak took the fruit and ate of it gladly. The mechling had been given the bulk of the trio's energon due to the simple fact the adults didn't want him going hungry. Even so, that couldn't have lasted, so he was near starving along with the rest.

Prowl though accepted his part, yet his attention was elsewhere. The crater was walled in gloom. The nanite cloud came to the edge of the great place and then stopped. While the jungle was thick and full, towering over it was some kind of ship. White and brassy in hue, the thing looked like a cylinder with over compartments stuck to it randomly. The thing stood on one end, and even in the light of Cybertron's twin stars, it was obvious the place had power. "The Quintesson?"

Jazz, mouth full, nodded. "Can only guess, but yeah. Who else?"

Prowl frowned, wings twitching. Even with his thoughts, he ate, for he almost didn't have the energon to do so. The tactical had been shut down as much as Prowl had been able to conserve energon. With an influx it was now warming up, desperate for data to process. "We need to be wary of guardians."

Not that the bulk of the group even listened. Mechs were gorging themselves, eating multiple fruits. While Ratchet tried to stop them, Ironhide kept him from doing much. No chasing mechs around.. fuel. Grumbling, Ratchet sat near Optimus and his twin, eating the part of a fruit he'd been given. The trio were careful just as Jazz and Prowl were being.

Optimus pointed at the ship, "That must be out goal."

Certainly no one argued that.

With tanks filled, even partially, mechs all over transformed and laid where they sat. While no one really said anything about it, most simply recharged. The warnings of guardians ignored. There had been nothing out in the fog, so why fear now.

Ratchet and Ironhide meanwhile were suddenly busy with the last of the unchanged mechs. Energon made them change no matter what they wished. Yet as tired as everyone was, most recharged right

through the uncomfortable screams.

Kind of disgusted with it all, Ratchet returned to Optimus when that was done and everyone rested. Only Jazz remained awake, playing guard.

Hours later Jazz lifted his head, ears perked. The suns had dropped below the horizon, but Cybertron's twilight wasn't ever really dark. The world didn't have much of a day or night cycle in regards to brightness and dark. The Polyhexian had dozed some, and hadn't truly recharged for days, but he still now sat up and listened to the woodland down below.

During the night the jungle turned into a glowing wonderland of bio luminescence. Everything seemed to glow blue or white or pink. Off a ways, something heavy made the foliage shiver.

"We got trouble." Jazz stood, his voice sharp.

Optimus was immediately awake and transforming. Ironhide a millisecond behind his prime. The danger made a ripple of warrior mechs to rise, doing the same. In down at their feet were the confused mechs who were waking more slowly. Prowl was one of those. Yet he saw the danger and too rose. Yet he didn't transform.

"What is it?" Optimus asked, flexing clawed hands. Megatron said nothing as he stepped up to stand along side the prime. He too was ready.

Jazz glanced back, visor glinting in the starlight. "Dunno, but it's big, and comin' this way."

Heralded by these words, something huge crashed out from beneath the trees, trailing leaves behind. It was three times the size of even Megatron, the largest mech there. On all fours, the creature was a gross combination of many forms. The legs didn't match, leaving it limping on strange limbs, a long scorpion like tail, the stubs of wings, and a malformed head with only one, great optic of yellow. Twisting horns flowed back to be lost in spiky plating. The only thing it had that was consistent was hue. Even here in the twilight, the beast was a rich purple in shade.

Skidding to a stop, dirt and foliage piling up before its mangled forelimbs. One had a paw with great claws, but the other was simply a

length of metal to the elbow. There the great beast bellowed out a challenge, showing huge teeth.

“Defend yourselves, my autobots!” Optimus shouted.

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